

HIS OFFICIAL FIANCÉE

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His Official Fiancée

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By *Berta Ruck* (*Mrs. Oliver Onions*)



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CHAPTER I

THE SUMMONS

“‘*A girl without a sweetheart,*’ girls—(I was readin’ something about it this very morning ’s I was coming along in the Toob),” chattered little Miss Holt over her work. “*A girl without a sweetheart is like a ship at sea, without knowing what port she’s to put in at—*”

“Accounts for the way a lot of ’em seem to pick their sweethearts on the principle ‘*Any port in a storm!*’” said Miss Robinson, with her little sniff.

“Well! Seems to me there’s a good deal in the idea that a poor husband is better than none,” came philosophically from Miss Holt, whose back is always curved like a banana over her typing-table, and who “smarms” her dull brown hair down under a hair-net until her head looks like a chocolate. “After all, my dear,

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if you're married, you're married ; and nobody can say you aren't. But if you *aren't* married, you aren't. And nobody can say you *are* ! ”

“ How true,” said Miss Robinson dreamily. “ Got that, Miss Trant ? ”

And she gave a sardonic glance towards me, to see if I was thoroughly taking this in. I was trying not to. The buzz of Cockney whispering which goes on, intermittently, all day long in our murky “ typists'-room ” was beginning to get on my nerves again almost as badly as it did in the first week that I worked at the Near Oriental Shipping Agency. I didn't raise my eyes. Then, above the click and the buzz, came a shriller :

“ Miss Trant, if you please ? ”

My fingers fell from the typewriter, and I looked up with a start into the sharp little South-London face of our smallest office-boy.

“ Yes ? What is it, Harold ? ”

“ Miss Trant, Mr. Waters says he wishes to see you in his private room at two o'clock.”

“ To see *me* ? ” I asked in a panic ; hoping that it might not be true, that by some lucky chance my ears had deceived me. They hadn't.

“ Yes ; at two o'clock sharp, miss.”

“ Very well, Harold,” I heard myself say in a small, dismayed voice.

Then I heard the door of our room shut upon the office-boy's exit.

I turned, to meet the shrewd, sympathetic brown eyes of Miss Robinson over her machine.

"Governor sent for you?"

I nodded dismally.

"Any idea what it's about, Miss Trant?"

"Oh, it might be about *anything* this last week," I sighed. "It might be about my forgetting to enclose those enclosures to the Western Syndicate. Or for leaving out the P.T.O. at the bottom of that Budapest letter. Or for spelling Belgium B-e-l-g-u-i-m. Or half a dozen other things. I knew Mr. Dundonald was going to complain of me. It's been hanging over me for the last three days. Anyhow I shall know the worst to-day."

"P'raps he'll give you another chance, dear," said little Miss Holt.

"That's not very likely," I said. "He's such an abominably accurate machine himself that he's 'off' anybody in this office who isn't a machine too, girl or man."

"D'you suppose the Governor even knows which of us *is* a girl and which is a man? because I don't," put in Miss Robinson. "I bet you he—"

"Talking in theyairr!" interrupted the grating Scotch accent of Mr. Dundonald, as he passed through to the Governor's room, where, alas! I, Monica Trant, was soon to present myself.

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A deathly silence, broken only by the clicking of the four typewriters, fell upon our department.

But I'm pretty sure that all the work *I* did from then on until lunch-time was of very little good.

That gloomy typists' room, looking over the "well" of the great buildings in Leadenhall Street, and so dark that we worked always by electric lights, switched on one over each machine, faded away from me. I ceased to know I was breathing in that familiar smell of fog and mackintoshes and dust and stuffiness. I ceased to hear the muffled roar of the City outside, and the maddening "click! click-a-click-prrring!" of the typewriters within, as I shut myself into my own mind.

Dismally I reviewed my own situation.

Here was I, "alone in London," all my poor little capital spent on the business-training which I had joyfully hoped was going to bring me in a nice "independent-feeling" income of at least two pounds a week. At the offices of William Waters and Son, of the Near Oriental Shipping Agency, a post I had obtained after weeks of weary searching for work, my salary was twenty-five shillings a week. Now, in all probability, I was going to lose even that. And then what was I to do? How was I to go on contributing my half of the rent of the Marconi

Mansions flat; how was I to pay for even my cheap meals and my "these'll-have-to-do" clothes? How *was* I to earn my living?

Obviously, I'm not cut out for a business-girl!

My three months in the office has plainly shown me that.

"You lack method, Miss Trant"—as Mr. Dundonald, the head of our department, has told me more than once. "You lack *concentrarrayshn*. You are intelligent enough, for a young lady, but when I think I can rely on you, what happens? I find ye out in some rideeclus mistake that the rrawest student from Pitman's wouldn't make. And this after I've warrned you times and again. What do you think is going to be the end of it?"

Evidently the sack.

And what else *is* there I can do?

Nothing!

I can't draw fashion-plates or write articles for the magazines.

Go on the stage—no, I never *could* remember my cue, even in private theatricals. I love children—but people want diplomas and Montessori Systems with their nursery-governesses. For serving in a shop I don't suppose I'm tall enough. That's one of the inconsistencies of men—they quote poetry about a girl being "just as high as their hearts," and then advertise for parlour-maids and mannequins who must

stand well over five foot nine, which I don't. Though, even if my nickname is "Tots," thank goodness I'm not dumpy, like little Miss Holt, who thinks a poor husband is better than none. . . .

What about the principal profession open to women—getting married?

Well, but I never see any men, now a days—you can't call things-in-the-City *men*, exactly—whom I could get married *to*. Besides, there's nobody, now that I'm an unbecomingly-dressed pauper, who would want to marry me.—Except, perhaps . . . Sydney Vandeleur . . .? Dear old Sydney is a friend left over from the days before the smash in our family when "*the world was more than kin when we had the ready tin.*" I've seen him several times since, and he was just the same as ever, so sympathetic and amusing; such a "pal," and with something about him that made me quite certain he'd be ready to become something more, the minute I encouraged him.

"Encouraging" him wouldn't be too unpleasant either, though I never was in love with Sydney. By this time I've come to the conclusion that I'm not a bit the falling-in-love type of girl. Major Montresor, of father's regiment in the old days, told my brother Jack once that "little Monica had the makings of a first-class flirt; she belonged to the successful

Order of the Cold Coquette." After listening to the dodderings and drivels and despairs of girls who *aren't* cold, I'm rather thankful that I *am*. At least I can be fond enough of people in a sensible sort of way. I could be of Sydney.

I suppose it will end in my getting him to marry me. . . .

But not yet. I haven't even got his address ! He and his mother have gone on a tour to Japan, and they won't be within reach for so much as a dinner for about a year. Whereas it's to-day, *this afternoon*, that I'm to get the sack without knowing what else is to happen to me !

A pretty depressing outlook !

At one o'clock I went out to lunch at what the typists here call "The Den of Lyons," with Miss Holt and Miss Robinson.

Our fourth typist, pretty, anæmic Miss Smith, had evidently made other arrangements to-day. She wore another hat ; a fresh bunch of violets was tucked into her long coat, and she monopolized the looking-glass while she attended to her complexion with a pot of face-cream, a clean hankie, and a book of *papiers poudrés*.

"We're extremely smart to-day, Smithie," said Miss Robinson. "What's on ? "

"I'm going out to lunch with Still Waters."

This was “the” office joke at the Near Oriental.

“Still Waters” meant no one less than Mr. William Waters, Junior, the head of the firm, who acted as General Manager, and from whom I had just received that fatal summons. He would as soon think of having a word to say to one of his typists out of business-hours as of giving a dance in the office itself. So that the excuse “*I’m going out with Still Waters*” always means that the speaker intends to keep her engagement to herself. It’s an open secret in the office that Smithie, who keeps a manicure-set in her hand-bag and who blushes twice daily down the telephone, has “got some sort of boy.”

“Oh, all right, haughty! Don’t bother to apologize,” said Miss Holt. And we left Miss Smith to her preparations.

Presently we caught sight of her again in the crowd outside. She didn’t see us, or anything else, I think. She was smiling and sparkling and flushed, and “looked as different as a fortnight’s holiday,” as Miss Robinson said. All three of us glanced from her to the young man she was with. To bring *that* transfiguring light into a girl’s face, wouldn’t you have expected him to be a mixture of some Greek God and Bombardier Billy Wells?—Far from it. “Smithie’s boy” was scarcely taller than she;

narrow-chested, office-shouldered, with a face as pale and peaked as a long envelope.

"What a kid!" criticized Miss Holt as we passed.

"All men *are* awful kids," pronounced Miss Robinson, "but you do bar them looking it. Of the two, I don't know that I wouldn't rather have 'em like graven images!"

Which brought us back to the horrible subject of that graven image, our Governor.

Over glasses of hot milk and the poached-eggs-on-toast, the plates of which rasped on the marble-topped table of the shop that *always* smells of steak-and-kidney pie, the other girls made themselves specially agreeable to the colleague who was preparing for the sack in another hour.

"It is too bad. We shall miss you from our room," said good-natured little Miss Holt. "Still—(Here, miss! I said egg, I didn't say sardine-sandwich! I wish you'd attend when anyone speaks! . . . She would, if I'd a boy with me! Such is life!)—Still, it isn't as if there wasn't other posts you could get. Easily. Don't you look so hopeless, Miss Trant. You've a taking way with you, and a nice smile; wasn't I passing the remark, only the other day, about what a pretty smile Miss Trant'd got? And, say what you like, looks *do* count when a young lady's in business!"

"Yes, it's a pity Miss Trant don't know she's good-looking. We ought to have told her about that, before," said Miss Robinson dryly. "But you're all right. *You'll* get taken on somewhere where they don't make an international affair of it over one misplaced comma or a tiny smudge off a new ribbon. *You'll* get round the men. I don't mean Still Waters. He's not a man, of course. He's a machine that can say '*Now, Miss Trant!*'"—here she broke into perfect mimicry of the Governor's curtest tone. "And '*What is the meaning of this evening's cables being one-fifth of a second after time?*' He doesn't count. You try for something where there's a human being at the head of affairs——"

"And if it's near she can come out to lunch with us just the same as before she left," suggested Miss Holt.

"She hasn't even left yet," said Miss Robinson encouragingly. "What price one of those fancy cakes, Miss Trant? Choose the least poisonous-looking, and I'll treat you—for luck!"

At a quarter to two we got back to the office.

I went and washed in the dressing-room. I took down all my hair. My hair's my pet vanity; it's very long and thick and silky, and "just the colour of massed black pansies against her honeysuckle-coloured flesh-tints," as Sydney

Vandeleur once said. He "puts" everything like the artist that he is. (Oh, why wasn't it to meet *him* that I was preparing, instead of that young frozen ogre of a Governor?) I wound the long swathe smoothly round my head again, pinned it firm, and made sure it was all right at the back, *not* with any idea of impressing Still Waters (who would scarcely have noticed the fact had all his typists been completely bald, so long as they were efficient), but merely because to feel perfectly neat made me a little less painfully nervous.

The clock, striking two, chimed in with my humble tap at the door of Mr. Waters' private room.

"Come in!" called the dreaded voice of our Governor.

And, trembling inwardly, in I went.

CHAPTER II

THE PROPOSAL

THE large, light room, with its handsome furniture, seemed to stretch for miles between the door and the big writing-desk, covered with green leather, at which Mr. Waters himself sat, frowning over a letter. The desk was generally bare but for the note of his day's appointments, with the hours, on the turn-over date-ticket.

“Two o'clock,” and a heavy “X” marked this coming interview, as I could not help seeing when I finished what seemed like a long and tiring walk over the thick crimson carpet, and stood meekly at his elbow.

He looked up, alert, clean-shaven, his fair hair brushed as sleek and shiny as the nap of his own silk hat, his mouth closed as tightly as his own cash-box; he was the very picture of a successful young City man, whose one and only interest is his business.

“Ah! That you, Miss Trant?” he said, in the quick, curt, business-like voice that Miss Robinson can imitate so perfectly.

He wheeled round in the chair to face me.

"Sit down, please."

I was thankful to sit down. Although I don't think my panic showed in my face, my knees were actually beginning to give under me. Mr. Waters pointed to a plump, green morocco-covered chair. Down I sat, on the very edge of it. I set my teeth to listen to what this office tyrant had to say.

(How extraordinary that he and Sydney Vandeleur should *both* be "men"!)

If he only wouldn't keep me; if he'd only just tell me to go, and get it over. . . .

But his first remark took me absolutely by surprise.

"Now, Miss Trant. If you don't mind, I want to ask you a few questions. Don't think them impertinent, for they are not so intended, and they are necessary to the matter in hand. And—please don't misunderstand them."

Here his alert face grew even more business-like. His keen grey eyes met my startled brown ones steadily for a moment. Then he added, in an emphatic, "*underlined*" sort of tone:

"There is nothing in these questions to which your father, or anyone belonging to you, could take any exception. You understand?"

"Understand"—No! I certainly didn't. What could he mean me to understand? I

hadn't grasped it even when he repeated the question a trifle impatiently.

"You do understand that, Miss Trant?"

"Oh—er—yes—of course," I murmured, in duty bound.

But I was so utterly dazed by this unlooked-for flight-off-at-a-tangent of the Governor's that I heard myself answering as if in a dream the questions he put next.

"Twenty-one. You're of age, then," I heard him saying through the daze. "Both parents dead: m'm. No one else belonging to you?"

"One brother in South Africa," my lips answered mechanically. And my inward wonder, "*What on earth has that got to do with Mr. Waters?*" was mingled with an added dull twinge of anxiety. For I haven't heard from poor old rolling-stoney Jack for three months or more.

"No one belonging to you in London? M'm. And you're dependent for your living upon what you earn here?"

(Yes! or else I shouldn't have to sit here answering questions about things that are absolutely no business of yours! was what I thought rebelliously.) I said aloud, reluctantly, "Yes."

"Where do you live, then—alone?"

"I share rooms with another girl in Battersea," I had to tell him, still wondering resentfully what in the world might be the meaning

of this catechism. *Wasn't* it the prelude to dismissal, after all, then? *Wasn't* he preparing to be hateful and sarcastic, and to tell me he felt my talents were being wasted at the Near Oriental (this is one of Mr. Dundonald's pet *clichés*), and that he advised me to look out elsewhere for a better position at a higher salary—if I could get it? What *would* be the next question, then?

It was *the* last thing that I should have dreamed of his asking.

"Do you mind telling me, Miss Trant, whether you are engaged to be married?"

Engaged? I? What *could* he want to know that for?

That was less his business, even, than any of the other questions he'd put!

It seemed doubly odd, since I *had* been meditating on the possibility of "getting engaged" that very morning. Ever since twelve o'clock, the mental image of Sydney Vandeleur's picturesque, dark face, with his small Vandyke beard and gentle, adoring brown eyes, had been very near me. There was always Sydney in the background, of course. Backgrounds don't count, presumably. Even if they did, though, what concern was it of my business employer's? I did wish I had enough self-assurance to announce frankly, "Well, I *do* mind telling you, as a matter of fact!" But . . . twenty-five

shillings a week don't provide a girl with much self-assurance !

I could only let him have the literal answer in return for his direct (and unwarrantable) question.

"Oh, no ; I'm not engaged."

"Good !" said Still Waters briskly. (Why "good" ?)

"Now, Miss Trant, I can tell you the reason—or part of the reason—I sent for you this afternoon. I must begin by impressing upon you very definitely that"—here he paused, and at each word of the announcement tapped solemnly on the big desk with his finger—"I don't want to get married myself."

"Of course not !" I almost gasped, wondering what in the world this very obvious truth (for one *could* not imagine Still Waters in connection with marriage or engagements) had got to do with me ?

"At the same time, there are reasons why for a time, at least—say a year—it should appear that I was going to be married. I may tell you those reasons later on ; that depends. At present I'll merely tell you that it is important to me that I should be officially, that is nominally, engaged."

I gazed at him. There was no more expression in his face than in the pearl pin in his expensive-looking grey tie. What could he mean ?

"I wish it to appear to everybody—to my family, to my acquaintances, to the people in this office—that I am actually engaged," he explained. "I wish to find someone who, to outward appearances, could take the place of my fiancée; could go about with me, stay at my home, and be introduced all round as the girl I meant to marry. She must understand from the very beginning that it was absolutely a matter of business; that the so-called 'engagement' would terminate at the end of the year, and that there could be no possible question of its ending in marriage. If I found this lady, I would make it worth her while; paying her at the rate of ten pounds a week for her services. You follow me, Miss Trant?"

I began to "follow," but I could scarcely believe that he really intended to carry out this mysterious scheme. It was more like the plot of a Gilbert and Sullivan opera than any "business" I'd ever heard of in real life. Still more incredible was what came next.

"It seemed to me from the first that the most suitable person for the post would be—yourself."

"Me?" I echoed, aghast. Oh, this was getting out of comic opera, and into the realms of nightmare! Was he *really* suggesting that I—

"Yes; you, Miss Trant. You are a lady in every essential, if I may say so, of looks and



manner. You seem to possess the gift of making yourself generally liked. You're distinctly intelligent, in spite of your work, which is——” here for one instant a gleam of what looked almost like humour seemed to flash from the Governor's eyes. But it was gone again so swiftly that I couldn't be sure whether it had ever been there. I must have been mistaken. He went on imperturbably: “I am a very fair judge of character, and I believe you to be trustworthy. As a mark of my confidence in you, I shall pay into your account the whole sum of five hundred pounds so soon as you let me know that you consent to enter into this arrangement.”

“Five hundred pounds?” I echoed stupidly.

“Yes; that is payment for the entire year at the rate of ten pounds weekly. I hope you will see your way to accepting it. Think it over to-night, please,” said Still Waters, in his curtest, most business-like tone, “and let me have your answer here—if you can, that is” (meaning “you must!”) “at eleven-fifteen to-morrow morning. I need hardly tell you that this must remain strictly between ourselves. I think that's all.”

He glanced at the round-topped mahogany clock above the fireplace, then put his hand out to the row of electric-bell pushes on his desk. Our interview was over.

“Good afternoon, Miss Trant.”

"Good afternoon," I murmured rather feebly, as I retraced my steps over that long, long stretch of carpet to the door.

I felt furious with myself for lacking the ordinary pluck to tell the Governor then and there :

"I shan't need to-night to think the question over. My answer is 'No!' I can't possibly undertake such an arrangement."

For how can I? How can I accept such an extraordinary position? "Officially" engaged to the Governor—the office tyrant, the mummy, the fault-finding automaton! Fancy "going about" with him, letting everyone imagine that I was actually going to marry him! Fancy playing that Gilbertian part, with no rouge and no fun and no footlights to carry me through it, in a "piece" that went on all day and every day! And fancy—this was almost the most appalling thought of all—fancy having to face all the other girls in the office!

Oh, impossible; quite impossible! I can't do it. I must summon up all my courage and tell him so to-morrow.

"Well?" whispered Miss Robinson, from the next typing-table. "What *did* the graven image say? Was he a brute? *Is* it the sack? Or is he giving you another chance?"

"I think he means to give me another chance," I murmured. (Such a chance!) "I am——"

"*Talking*, ladies!" broke in the warning.
"Miss Trant, it's generally you, I notice!"

And Mr. Dundonald's voice brought back the bugbear that has haunted me since twelve this morning—the terror of being penniless and out of work once more.

Oh, if I could only attain to some job, *some other job*, that would bring me in that princely salary of ten pounds a week! Imagine the blessed relief, the security of knowing that one had five hundred pounds in one glorious, solid lump at one's back. But then, imagine accepting the Governor's terms before one earned it! Oh, no!

The bogey "*out of work*" haunted me down into the Tube lift, along the Embankment, all the way back up our grey Battersea street, with the red-faced pavement-artist who always touches his cap to me, smiles and points to his lurid chalk-drawing of a wreck with the legend: "*Like the Artist—On the Rocks!*"

"I'm on the rocks myself, Blossom. This is probably the last penny I shall be able to give you!" I told him, with a desperate little laugh.

Then I turned in at the entrance to Marconi Mansions, and climbed up our stone stairs to the cheap but cosy little top-flat which has for six months meant "Home" to us two bachelor girls.

How long should I be able to afford to share it?

CHAPTER III

THINKING IT OVER—

I ALWAYS expect to be in long before Cicely Harradine, the girl who shares the place with me. We first made friends in a ten-shillings-a-week bedroom at the Twentieth Century Club, when she was left much as I was, a waif without any friends that counted, and with just a tiny lump of capital. This she used up in paying her fees at the Slade School of Art, where she'd gone, in her innocence, with a view to taking up fashion-drawing. They all used to say at home that she'd "a gift" for sketching, and she'd heard—we've all heard!—that there are fortunes to be made out of fashion-plates. Only she hadn't realized that for a girl of her sort, lovely and good-hearted and "gormless," there's only one way of getting a fortune; namely, by marrying it. And how *can* you marry, as she often says plaintively, if you never even *see* any "possible" men? All the people she seems to see nowadays—besides Slade students—are the gorgeous Jewesses who deal

at the "studio" where Cicely's one real "gift" (that of a tall, willowy figure) is now turned to advantage by showing off the evening-frocks and opera-wraps of Madame Chériquette, in Bond Street, in the show-rooms she can seldom leave until well after seven o'clock.

So to-day I was astonished to find the second-hand, cretonne-covered couch in our sitting-room already occupied by what looked like a bundle of rugs, dishevelled red curls, and arnica bandages, whence proceeded the sound of dismal sobs.

"Cicely!" I cried, alarmed. "You back already? Why, what's happened?"

"Oh, my dear, such an *awful* catastrophe!" wailed the voice of Cicely, while the willowy figure twisted itself into sitting up against our cheap flock cushions. "What do you think? When I went out to lunch this morning I managed to slip on a bit of banana-skin that some perfect *pig* had flung down at the crossing—No, Tots! it *wasn't* those shoes I will wear, so you needn't say that!—and I twisted my ankle and cut my head on the kerb, and I had to be brought home in a taxi, and the doctor's been, and he says I'm to keep my foot up for a fortnight, and what—what on earth's to become of my job?" wept Cicely. "Chériquette won't take me on again, for there's a girl waiting *now* for my place! A *niece* of somebody's! She'll

snap it up ! And what am I to do ? Hurp, hurp ! ”

She could only sob, and I could only stroke her pretty, incompetent fingers.

“ There’ll be that *doctor* to pay ! And it’ll be the *rent* again in three weeks’ time ! It’s *always* being the rent, in this place, Tots ! It *never* was at home. And *I* haven’t got any money saved now that I’ve bought that bicycle for Saturday afternoons. Isn’t it perfectly awful ? Hurp, hurp ! Oh, girls at home who get doctors and dentists and washing and everything *f-found* for them, hurp ! are so fond of *envying* girls who earn their own livings because it’s so free and independent—how *can* they ? They wouldn’t want to earn their horrible livings if they *only* knew how ghastly it was as soon as you got ill and hadn’t anything but a few shillings between you and goodness knows ! ”

“ ‘ *Earned increment is sweet, but that unearned is sweeter,* ’ ” I quoted bitterly.

“ Oh, you *laugh* at everything, Tots ! This is serious. *S-s-s-seven-and-sixpence !* That’s all I’ve got left in the whole wide world ! And *you’ve* nothing but your twenty-five bob a week ! ”

(Yes ! I thought ; and even that modest salary will be lost to me to-morrow. For when I tell the Governor that I find I can’t accept his offer, he’s pretty certain to sack me. After his

allusion to my “work,” after Mr. Dundonald’s “warrnings,” what else need I expect? But this wasn’t the moment to tell my poor, distracted chum my own bit of bad luck. Even if we *were* both out of work and on those rocks together, it must, for the present at least, be kept from *her*.)

“Now look here, don’t you worry,” I said, more cheerfully than I felt. “You *know* you’re no end of a ‘find’ as a mannequin, because you’ve got the voice that goes with the figure. It must be rather a shock when Madame’s clients ask something that looks like a young duchess in a dream of a gown ‘*What did you say the price was?*’ and get told in the accents of White-chapel ‘*Twenty-it paounds, Madam!*’ That’s the pull *you’ve* got, so you know you’re sure of another good place as soon as your foot’s right. Until then I—I can manage perfectly well for the two of us. What about something to eat? Mrs. Skinner coming back to cook to-night?” —Mrs. Skinner is *supposed* to “do” for us. I often think that, in another sense, she *will*!

“No. She’s off for the whole day to go to a funeral. You said she might, this morning.”

“So I did. I thought it was a week ago—it feels like it. Well, I’ll get supper.”

As I passed into our little dark cubby-hole of a kitchen, I saw something that I’d overlooked

before—a letter left lying on the mat, as it had dropped through the letter-box. I picked it up. It was addressed to me. And at the sight of the thin foreign envelope and the South African stamp my heart sank even lower. I had a presentiment that I hadn't come to the worst yet.

It was a letter from my brother in Cape Town ; poor old ne'er-do-weel Jack, who scarcely ever writes anything more than a picture postcard with a view of the Cape of Good Hope, or something of that kind, unless he's in trouble and wants something.

With a sigh I took out the crackling, scrawled sheet ; and my eyes fell on the last sentences first.

“ You'll have to get the money for me, old girl. You know you can if you try. Ask Vandeleur to lend it to us ; he'd do anything for you. Haven't got his address, or I would have written to him myself. I am absolutely on the rocks, so don't wait. You'll have to wire a hundred pounds to the Bank here——”

A hundred pounds ? Mightn't he just as well have said “ a million ” ? What was all this about ? I took the letter into my own little room and sat down on the camp-bed to read it through. . . .

In five minutes I have grasped all that I can take in at present of the situation ; an old one.

Jack is in trouble, worse trouble than ever before. Debts ; an I O U that was to fall due in six weeks. Threatened exposure of—*something* that he doesn't explain. “*A business affair?*”

Yes ; Mr. Dundonald is quite right. I *have* “no head for business routine.” My head's going round with the bewilderment of it. It *can't* mean that Jack, my own brother, Father's only son—one of the *Trants*—has been “not quite straight” with the accounts that are in his care ? He must be mad ! It must be the hot sun in that awful country. Not *Jack*—!

But to suggest that I should turn to Sydney Vandeleur for the money, even supposing that I knew where the Vandeleurs were to be found just now—oh ! As if I wouldn't rather die ! Yet there's nothing else that I can do—

Stop. There is one thing.

For, as if flashed in letters of fire over the dim purple sky over the London roofs outside my window, I seem to see the words—

“FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS !”

And they mean, not only a solution of the difficulties of Miss Trant, typist, not only

comforts and security for Cicely, the show-girl out of work, but the saving of our family name and honour from disgrace. Help instead of ruin for that poor dear weak-kneed broken reed of a brother of mine.

It's Providence, that wildly eccentric scheme of the Governor's. I don't care what its object may be. I only know that now—now—I daren't refuse to fall in with it. Never mind the details. The main fact is that *I must have that hundred pounds, and this is the only way to it.*

I've just taken supper into our sitting-room, and I've been able to smile quite recklessly down into the woe-begone, girlish face under the arnica bandages.

“ Buck up, Cis, and eat some really good scrambled eggs with little bits of ham chopped up in them. And then there's some glass loganberries, hot ; and somebody'd been what Mrs. Skinner calls ‘ pampering the milk,’ so I got a brown jar of cream for them. One comfort of living in a *ménage* without any *men* (a joke, so please laugh) is that we can eat what we *like*, instead of stodging horrible, gristly chops and steaks and potatoes every night of our lives. And I brought in some red ink—not Veuve Emu this time, but really decent Burgundy to cheer us up—”

“ But, my *dear*— ! ” protested Cicely, with

the scared glance of the business-girl who knows what it costs to eat and drink.

"It's not extravagance. I can afford it."

"You can't! You can only *just* manage to scrape along for yourself—and you know your poor darling hat's awful, and you told me you couldn't get another—you haven't managed to put by a penny for 'extras'—you told me yesterday—"

"Ah, yesterday! But I shall have some more money—*now*."

"What?—and you never told me when you came in? What, have Waters and Son actually given you a *rise*?"

"Supplementary duties," I explained briefly, drawing a wooden chair up beside Cicely's couch and laying a clean towel over it for a tablecloth before I set down the plate of ham-scramble. "Pretty well-paid, too. Yes. I got the job to-day. And," I concluded with resolution, "I begin it to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV

ACCEPTED !

“ **A**ND when do you think the ‘ engagement ’ had better be announced ? At once ? ”

This was what the Governor said to me this morning when I again presented myself at his desk ; this time with the timid “ acceptance ” which, after poor Jack’s desperate appeal, is my only alternative.

“ At *once* ? ” I gasped. “ Oh, but—How could it ? The—well—people would think it so”—I checked a hysterical laugh—“ so funny ! ”

“ Funny ? What’s funny about it ? ” took up the Governor, as sharply as if he didn’t see anything at all odd in the whole situation. But he does. He *must* ! What a hateful trick men have of pretending they’re *not* pretending—when you’re unable to prove, in so many words, that they *are* ! People talk about women being more complicated ; good gracious ! It’s we who are simple and straightforward. What

was I to make of the Governor, when he asked me, in quite an annoyed tone of voice, "I suppose men at the heads of offices have become engaged to their employees before now Miss Trant?"

"Y—yes—of course—*Become engaged.*"—He was talking now as if *this* were *that!*—"But not if—"

"Not if what?"

"Well, not if they have never seen them to speak to!" I explained falteringly. "You see, Mr. Waters, the three other typists in my room—"

"Oh! Those girls!" said Mr. Waters casually, and I caught my breath.

For in the tone of those two words from the Head of Affairs I heard the rest of his meaning—"If *they* think it odd—if *they* make difficulties, they can go, at once."

I saw that nightmare threat of "the sack" looming again, this time over the heads of three girls who had worked with and always been very decent to me. They—if they stood the least bit in this young office tyrant's way—could go!

"It's not only the girls," I urged, clenching my hands to keep them from shaking, and hating the man who made me so nervous. "It's—everybody. Mr. Dundonald, Mr. Alexander, they must all know that you scarcely exchanged a word with me until you sent for me yesterday,

when we—they all thought you were going to dismiss me——”

“ Ah ? ” said the Governor coolly.

“ —S-so I can’t tell them, right on the top of *that*, that we are actually engaged to be married ! There’ll have to be—some—some other sort of warning ! ”

“ Don’t see the necessity myself,” said Still Waters, fixing those keen grey eyes upon me as if I were a letter-file or a paper-weight, or some other inanimate object that they’d happened to fall upon while he was meditating on other things. I wondered if he were thinking that, sooner than be bothered over this affair, he would sack Mr. Dundonald, Mr. Alexander and his whole staff ! “ Still, if you prefer it. You mean that there had better be some intermediate stages ; that I ought to begin by singling you out from the others, seeing more of you, and so on. Quite so.”

It was uncanny, the cut-and-dried way in which he spoke of proceedings which—well, are always looked upon as so intensely the opposite of cut-and-dried ! This affair was the imitation of something very different ; still, one hardly expected him to be able to map it all out, like the diagrams in scientific dressmaking !

“ Now, how am I supposed to ‘see more’ of you ? ” he went on, in the same tone as he

might have asked, "*Where must I join this dotted line to section D?*"

"Ah, I have it." (The sections were beginning to fit in neatly.) "You will come into my room here each afternoon in Mr. Alexander's place, and take down my letters."

"Very well," I agreed, relapsing into my usual outward meekness and inward rebelliousness.

What a *fearful* nuisance, to be banished to the Siberia of the Governor's private room, after the murky but cheery atmosphere of the typists' "glory-hole," and the society of three other girls!

A couple of years ago I should have used the shibboleth of my set at home to describe these same girls—"Terrible!—Impossible!" I should have noticed nothing about them beyond their cheap "stock" clothes and the Cockney accents that used to be such an hourly jar to my nerves. I shouldn't have differentiated the sentimental "Smithie" from Miss Robinson, who has more capacity in her carbon-stained little finger than most of the girls who were with me at Wycombe Abbey had in their heads. I should scarcely have considered them of the same race of being as myself, and as for being on friendly, talkative terms with them—Well, having to fend for oneself in the labour-market does knock a good deal of the nonsense out of

one. Here I was, quite annoyed at the prospect of giving up the companionship of the three for the afternoons !

Still, it would be worth it. My employer would be as good as his word about the five hundred pounds. He'd open an account for me. And at lunch-time I shall be able to cable that much-needed hundred to Cape Town.

I'm to begin earning it as private clerk—to a living tape-machine !

"Yes. That will be quite the best plan," he went on. "That will pave the way for it." His tone became if anything more "scientifically diagrammatic" still as he said, "To-day is May fourteen ; let me see— How long do you suppose it would take before it would be considered the natural thing for me to fall in love with you ? "

"'Natural' ? How could it ever be considered natural" was on the tip of my tongue, "for you to fall in love with anybody ?— You, who think it ought to be mapped out into a certain number of days, like that sum about '*twenty reapers reaping so many acres in a week.*' "

Primly I answered aloud, "I should think you could please yourself, Mr. Waters."

"Well, we will see about that presently," said my employer, turning to the desk. "And now there is this—" After speaking about

"the time it took to fall in love," I thought he'd reached his limit. But no. He went further.

From a drawer that he unlocked he took out a paper that he handed to me.

"I have taken the precaution of having our whole arrangement put down in black-and-white, if you will kindly sign it here."

—"In *black-and-white!*!"—"sign——!"

I felt the angry colour surging up into my face; I was all the more furious because I dare not show the real rage I was in.

"Oh, yes. I'll sign it," I said, with desperate meekness, "if you really think it's necessary. If you imagine that I am the kind of girl who might take advantage of our—our contract afterwards, sue you for breach of promise, or——"

"Come, come!" Still Waters interrupted briskly, peremptorily. "It's just because I didn't think you were 'that kind of girl,' amongst other reasons, that I selected you for my post. This instrument is drawn up largely on your own account. You have a pen——?"

I took it out of the case fastened to the front of my very utilitarian blue delaine blouse. I hate wearing it there. I always look upon it as the sign of servitude and the mark of the beast, but it's the custom—and business-like.

"Right. Now, Miss Trant, I think that's

all for this morning. You can arrange to come in and take down my letters each afternoon at a quarter to three, beginning to-morrow."

"Yes," I said, in my meekest tone.

Loud were the murmurs of commiseration that broke from my three friends in my own room when they heard of this novel arrangement.

"What, my dear? *You* to take down his old letters? That's the Governor's idea of giving you one more chance, I suppose," sniffed Miss Robinson, "before he sacks you! Pity he didn't tell you to go, and get it over yesterday!"

"He's simply impossible to please. Why, when I come here first," said Miss Holt, "he had had three girls at it in one week and they all came out in tears because the Machine had snapped their heads off. For one thing, he dictates at such a rate that I don't know how he expects anyone to follow him without they have to ask him to repeat it, and *then* he glowers at you like a Gordian! See if he doesn't!"

"It'll be 'Now, *Miss Trant!*'" mimicked Miss Robinson, gabbling at top-speed. "' ' Got that? Go on—

" 'We can offer no further explanation of same beyond facts already supplied, and are of opinion

that there is nothing to be gained by prolonging this correspondence.' Certainly nothing to be gained by you, my poor dear ! ”

“ No, he'll be sending for that stolid Scotch Sandy back before the afternoon's over ! ”

“ Don't discourage the girl too much before she starts. Still, I wish you weren't forsaking our room for the afternoons, Miss Trant. We shall miss your merry prattle and your footstep on the stair.”

“ Yes, and there won't be much prattling for you in there,” said Miss Smith. “ More like sitting among the mummies and sphinxes and things in the British Museum. Girls, can you imagine Still Waters ‘prattling’ to anybody, even ~~as~~ a little boy ? ”

“ That man was never anything so human as a little boy,” declared Miss Robinson. “ He was created grown-up and ready-made and put together like a Remington. Probably in the very act of clicking out—

“ ‘Contract B.954. Our buyers advise us as under,’ and so on.

“ I wouldn't mind what I betted that *he* never cried over going to school for the first time, or began to fancy himself more when he'd sat out at a dance and flirted——”

“ *Flirted!* The Governor ! ” I put in—quite forgetting what would presumably be my cue very soon, and laughing with the others.

" You might just as well think of him falling really desperately in love with——"

" *Talk-ing*, ladies," broke in the usual voice, followed by the usual lull.

But the usual twinge of fear didn't visit me this time.

Let Mr. Dundonald report me; let him complain of me, bitterly, to the Governor if he likes! All Caledonia, stern and wild, can't get me turned out of the Near Oriental *now*. To-morrow sees me unshakably installed as—the Governor's private clerk!

I must say Mr. Waters is even more paralysingly alarming to work for in this capacity.

His dictation—Well! Miss Robinson described it. He simply doesn't realize, doesn't *mean* to realize, that "a clerk" is composed of anything more than a pad and a scurrying pencil. He literally does not *see* that these objects may be trembling in the grasp of the anxious slip of a young woman, who has to guide them! He's excruciatingly particular about the transcribing of his sheaf of letters. And I shudder—that is, I *should* have shuddered only last week—to think what would happen to Miss Trant, typist, if she brought in anything to be signed one second after four-thirty, which is his time for leaving.

But now I'm secure in the knowledge that

however much that machine of a young man with the closed cash-box of a mouth may long to sack me as a typist, my other, more lucrative, post could not be so easily filled.

Hurray !

To-day is Friday : that Day of Terror in the office, the day of the outward mails. But it's brought no terror to me. My week's salary, if you please, has amounted to eleven pounds, five shillings.

Twenty-five shillings of that was paid out to me in the usual way by Mr. Wallis, our cashier —little dreaming that my purse was already bulging with ten more than welcome sovereigns that I got in exchange for my own cheque (The grandeur of that !) at the Bank where that providential five hundred pounds (four hundred since) has been put down to the account of "Miss M. Trant."

I daren't allow myself to think what would have happened if it hadn't been for that.

As it is, I am able to take home quite a lot of invalid dainties to Cicely (left to the tender mercies of Mrs. Skinner) as well as a lovely lemon-coloured azalea in a pot, and a brand-new novel (four-and-six—half her share of the house-keeping money !).

Spending this fortune will come fatally easily to me, I know. But I've a dim presentiment

that the earning of it isn't going to be as easy as that !

This morning, which now seems about a year since I began my "supplementary duties," Harold summoned me to appear at twelve o'clock, instead of after lunch, before the Governor.

First of all I was seized with nervous flurry, wondering what on earth I'd done. Then I remembered that it wouldn't really matter about that. What mattered was what I should *have* to do next ?

There was another cut-and-dried plan for this in the very tone of the Governor's "Good morning" when he glanced up to see me standing submissively beside his desk again.

"Now, Miss Trant, you have been working in here exactly a fortnight," he reminded me.

"Exactly a fortnight." I wonder if he is going to keep count of every one of the three-hundred-and-sixty-five days of the year which must elapse before I shall be able to say a gleeful good-bye to him and his diagrammatic "engagement ?" I expect so : I expect there's a time-table for each one, drawn up and carefully put away for reference in one of the locked drawers of his big cleared desk.

"I think that something more might be done at once about this arrangement of ours."

"Oh, yes ? "

(A fortnight! Neither too long nor too short a time, he probably considered, for some "fresh development" to take place.)

"So what about my taking you out to lunch to-day?"

What about it? A vivid mental picture of the expression on the faces of Miss Robinson, Miss Holt and Smithie rose before me. What—*what* would they look like when— Well! They've *got* to look it sooner or later, so it might as well *begin* to-day.

"Certainly," I nearly said. Then I hesitated. No! Why *should* he be able to "fit in" every single detail of his plans, with the ease of a born jig-saw genius? Why shouldn't he have to make some rearrangement, consult someone else's convenience for *once* in his life? I would just try to put my tiny little spoke in his wheel here, to *see*.

"Mr. Waters, would you mind making it to-morrow instead?"

"Much the same to me," returned my employer rather unexpectedly—still, I suppose he *would* allow a twenty-four hours' margin in these arrangements, in case of accidents. "But why wait?"

"Oh, because"—No woman ever does anything for *one* unadulterated motive; a thing men won't understand! So I had my second choice of reasons quite ready, and it was quite

naturally, as well as truthfully (for I *was* thinking of Smithie's preparations for an outing), that I suggested—"it would seem more 'natural' if I were to have on a new—my best hat to go out to lunch in instead of the little old cap I put on because of this drizzle to-day."

"Ah! Very well," said Mr. Waters, with his succinct nod. He added, "I suppose that sort of thing is what they mean when they say—when *women* say—that women have a much better eye to detail in business than men have?"

(I don't *quite* know how he meant that. But never mind, Mr. Cut-and-Dried. I *have* altered your time-table by a day, at least!)

"To-morrow, then," said Mr. Waters, after I had said "Is that all?" And I went.

The next day was a regular "new-hat" day. Just the sort of day to go out to lunch with a "hovering" *fiancé*—a real one!—I thought, as I set off down the Embankment, leaving Cicely, whose foot isn't quite right even yet, at the open sitting-room window with a novel.

It was brightly sunny, but, although we're nearly in June now, there was a nip of cold in the breeze; the smile of a flirt—of a "cold coquette," as Major Montresor described me once. I wonder what *he'd* think if ever he met me again? Probably that it was just like little

Monica to "pull off" making a good match with another froggy-natured person.

I laughed at this as I was walking along to the corner where I get the motor-bus. After all, there's nothing to do but laugh at it—at the whole affair. Actually, it was a momentous choice to have thrust upon any girl; and it might have cruelly embarrassing side-issues. But what's the good of dwelling on momentous and cruel aspects of subjects that *have* a comic side to them? The only way is to look hard at that comic side—to see the joke, the whole joke, and, most important of all, *nothing but the joke*.

I felt satisfactorily strung up to the coming "fun" of the situation when I got into the typists' dressing-room at the Near Oriental.

Here I found Miss Holt listening to Miss Smith, evidently a little headachy and nervous, attempting to "stand up" to Miss Robinson in some argument.

"The matter with *you*," she was saying pettishly, "is that you're setting up to be a *man-hater*!"

"Setting up? No such luck," said Miss Robinson, maddeningly good-tempered. "If I could ever see a fellow I didn't think was awful, I'd begin thinking of setting up. But where *are* all the men, good gracious? What does a girl ever see, working in holes of offices?"

Weeds ! Indoor weeds, smelling of stale Virginians and wearing Number Thirteen collars."

"Collars aren't anything !" Miss Smith flushed an angry pink.

"No ; but what they go round are. And I must say I like to see a chap with a good, thick, strong-looking one (that's why all the *nice* girls love a sailor, Smithie) with plenty of sunburn and no spots on it, and—Hul-lo, Miss Trant !"

I had turned up at the right moment to prevent a squabble—I and my brand-new hat bought out of Chériette's window, no less ! and provided by the princely salary.

"I say, Miss Trant, my child, you're blossoming out !" commented Miss Holt, all eyes and envy. "How much did that roof cost you ? It's a good one."

"It *is* rather a good one," I admitted quietly. "I'm so glad you like it."

But I said no more until the morning's work was over and we had trooped back into the dressing-room to get ready for going out at one o'clock. Then :

"I can't come to lunch to-day," I said, drawing on the deliciously "fresh"-feeling white gloves I'd bought for myself at the same time as the hat, and giving a glance round the dressing-room to make sure that they all took in the next announcement. "I'm going out."

"Who with?" seemed to burst, of its own accord, from three pairs of lips at once.

Drawing myself up to what there is of my full height, I smothered an inclination to giggle foolishly, and answered with starchy dignity, "Since you *must* know, I'm going out to lunch with Still Waters."

"Oh, my dear, give that old joke a rest," urged the most frequent user of "the old joke," Miss Smith, flushing anew with interest, "and tell us who HE is! This is something quite new, Miss Trant, isn't it? Doesn't she look conscious, girls? Didn't I know that hat meant something? How exciting! I'm *so* glad, dear; but, do tell us! Not his name, of course——"

For in the code of these girls, it's not fair to ask for names.

"—but just his *Christian* name!"

"William," I admitted, smiling as "coyly" as I could.

"William! Sounds a bit—stand-offish," objected Miss Holt. "D'you call him 'Billy,' by any chance?"

"Never," I said solemnly, "not by any chance."

"Of course not. 'Billy's' no class," said Miss Robinson. "'William? Ahem! William!'" in a pompous bass voice. "Dark or fair, Miss Trant?"

"Fair."

"M'm. Well, I suppose Miss Trant *would* pick a fair one, her being such a reel brunette," commented Miss Holt, "but as for me, I never could take to a fair man. Puts me in mind of weak tea. About as fair 's the Governor. Miss Trant ? "

"Ye-es ; just about."

"Anything for a bit of a change," said Miss Robinson satirically. "I should have thought you'd have liked another colour to sit opposite to at lunch, after having to have the same sort of thing staring you in the face all the afternoon. However !—no accounting for 'em ! . . . I hope he's tall, though ? "

"Over six foot, I should think."

"Ah ! Well grown, William ! Is the young gentleman in the City, may I ask ? "

"Yes, he is."

"Isn't she a good sort, answering all our impertinent questions like this ! One more, Miss Trant, and we won't bother you. Where are you going to meet him ? "

I don't think she expected that I *would* answer this. But I said quite frankly, "I am to meet him just outside the front entrance in Leaden-hall Street." And I whisked out of the room to the lift. I didn't tell the girls "Look out of that window on the other side of the landing and you'll see him."

I knew it wasn't necessary.

In two minutes' time I was being helped into a taxi by the august hand of our Governor himself.

I lifted my head and looked straight up at the landing window. Yes, there they were, all three of them, flattening their noses against the pane. I nodded and smiled with bravado. My three colleagues were too utterly taken by surprise to even smile back at me. The expression on their three faces was even more pronounced than as I had foreseen it. Miss Holt was standing in front, and as we drove away I saw her eyebrows rise to her netted hair, while her mouth dropped open.

I could almost *bear* the gasp that came from it, of :

“*Girls!* Did you *ever*? She really *is*!—with Still Waters! Well! What *ever* next?”

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST LUNCH TOGETHER

“TO the Carlton,” ordered Mr. Waters ; and off we drove.

I hadn’t been inside the Carlton since the days before the “smash”—the days when I was a young lady of leisure, without an idea that I should presently be toiling in the grimy typists’ room at the Near Oriental from nine o’clock until six, wearing home-made delaine shirts, and trembling lest I might lose my hard-earned twenty-five shillings a week !

The last time I’d been taken there to tea, after a matinée, by my brother Jack and Sydney Vandeleur, who had ordered roses of a very special pink to match the frock I’d worn then, and had sent a message to the band to play my favourite waltzes. Yes, as Jack said, Sydney would do anything for me, always. I expect Jack thought that the hundred pounds which saved his name came, as he suggested, from the Vandeleurs. Well, I couldn’t possibly “give

away" the truth about the anomalous position his sister accepted in order to earn the money!

Thank goodness, the Vandeleurs were at the other end of the world, and wouldn't be home for a year, thought I. By then my time would be up, and they needn't know of my make-believe "engagement"—except that it was "broken off"!

"I telephoned for a table," said Mr. Waters, as we left the ordinary work-a-day world of hurrying people and crowded, petrol-breathing motor-buses in the Haymarket, and entered the restaurant—warm, perfumed, bright with dainty clothes and pretty faces that smiled above the little tables.

Ours was in a delightfully cosy corner, next to an empty table reserved for three persons. The decorations were of pink hothouse roses, almost the same as Sydney's! How very different from that marble-topped table in the crowded "Den of Lyons" above which Miss Robinson, Smithie and little Miss Holt were probably even now gossiping excitedly over this event; but *how* much rather I would have been with them!

"Now, Miss Trant, what do you prefer for lunch?"

(*My* only variation of lunch for the last year having been from "Bovril and a baked apple")

to "Poached-egg-on-toast, with a glass of hot milk.")

"I don't mind at all."

"Then I'll order."

And very delicious were the things he did order. Apparently even a machine liked perfect *bisque de homard*, and crisp whitebait—his one touch of nature, in fact.

I longed for Cicely—who does love nice food, poor child!—to be there to help me enjoy this. In fact, I wished that Cicely and I could have had the lunch to our two gossiping selves. How we should have enjoyed all the luxuries, from the pretty glass to the freedom to chat, softly but unrestrainedly, about everyone we noticed in the place. I have heard it said that "Women would rather talk to other *women* than to *men*, even when they would rather talk to a *man* than to a *woman*." I don't think I've often met any single man I'd rather talk to than to a fairly amusing member of my own sex. You have to say most things twice to men, and then they don't really understand. . . .

Still Waters, of course (as his typists explain to each other at least four times in a morning), isn't what you could call a man. Somehow, in surroundings that used to be more familiar to me than offices and City streets, I lost a little of that awe-struck nervousness of my employer. For a time I could almost forget he was that.

He became—Well! he made me feel as I did in the old days when I had got someone very heavy-in-hand to take me in to dinner, or as if I were sitting out a dance with some rather hopeless partner. I mean that was about as far as any conversation between us went—a few stilted, distract remarks, punctuating long stretches of silence.

Meanwhile, I glanced round the big place at the other luncheon-parties, people laughing and chatting together—out evidently for amusement, not “business”!

Several times I caught glances directed at our own table. I wondered what the people were thinking of us—of the enormously tall, fair young man with “City” stamped all over him, from his smooth head to his glossy boots, and the small, dark-eyed girl in the black velours hat which looked so very much more expensive and stylish than her neatly-cut but ancient serge costume would lead them to expect.

Perhaps they thought that the big young man with the face as expressionless as a fireproof curtain was slightly bored by taking his country cousin round the sights of London? Perhaps they thought we were really engaged? It didn’t matter. There was no one in the restaurant who knew either of us. Idly I wondered who would come in and take the “reserved” table close to us.

"Miss Trant, you took good care that the other typists knew for a fact with whom you were coming out?"

"Oh, yes. They were all looking out of the landing window as we drove off."

"Good!" said Still Waters.

And again I almost fancied that I caught that flash of something like humour in his granite-grey eyes, as I'd fancied it before, when he spoke about my "intelligence" and my work. But again it was gone before I could make sure. I was glad. One doesn't want a machine to have any sense of humour. And I shouldn't find it so easy and unembarrassing to be on terms of "official fiancéedom" with anything but a machine.

"I shall take you out to lunch two or three times this week," he announced, in his orders-for-the-day voice, "and perhaps to tea. On Saturday I shall ask you to come with me to a matinée that you can talk about, and so on, to the others."

"Very well, Mr. Waters," I said meekly.

"And now that we've led up to it in this way, I see no point in waiting. So next week, Miss Trant, the 'engagement' had better be announced."

"Certainly," I agreed, again picturing to myself the stupefaction of everybody at the Near Oriental, from Mr. Dundonald (a pity the

shock can't incapacitate him for life!) down to Harold.

At home there'd be Cicely. I'm fond of her, but I dread this. She takes such an *exasperating* interest in anything that can be called a love-affair. I myself can't see what there is so thrilling about "Who is going to marry whom, and why?"

But Cicely positively "collects," just as some people collect book-plates, all she can find out on this hackneyed subject. I know she'll insist on treating this arrangement between my employer and myself as a real, romantic "*affaire de cœur.*" Well, I suppose I shall *have* to keep from slapping her!

Then there'll be Mr. Waters' friends, whoever they are, to whom I shall have to be introduced as the girl he's going to marry. (Oh, *lor'!* as Mrs. Skinner puts it.)

"After which," pursued the Governor, "I think I shall have to ask you to— What is it, Miss Trant? Just seen somebody you know?"

"Yes," I managed to murmur; "I know the lady who has just come in—at the next table."

For at the table which had been reserved for three, two of the party had just turned up.

One was a fair-haired young girl, expensively frocked in blue velvet, but still looking like school-room tea. The other—how well I knew

the slim, well-preserved silhouette of her figure, the carefully-graded bloom of her face !

It was Lady Vandeleur, whom I'd imagined to be in Japan !

She is a charming woman, but she has two faults. One is that, with a son of thirty-two, she insists on remaining twenty-five. The other is that, unlike dear old Sydney, to whom the downfall of the Trant fortunes made absolutely no difference, she's never really liked me since the "smash."

Before that, she was quite eager to explain that I was "already" like a young daughter to her. But it's two years since I heard the tone of effusive affection with which Sydney's mother was speaking to the girl beside her.

"My dear child, aren't you *starving*? I vote we begin. That naughty boy of mine is so late. We really can't wait for Sydney!"

"For Sydney!" Goodness! Then presently Sydney himself would join them. He would take the chair that faced our table—to which his mother sat with her back turned. He would see me—he'd be sure to come across and speak!

My mind was in a whirl of wondering what Sydney Vandeleur would think when he saw the girl he admired lunching *tête-à-tête* at the Carlton with that big, imperturbable stranger. And then Sydney himself came in.

I was in the middle of a particularly ambrosial *pêche Melba*, and anyone would have thought I didn't raise my eyes from it. But thank goodness, my eyelashes are long enough for the purpose they're given a girl—to be looked up through, without a man seeing. In a flash I'd taken in all of Sydney that one could see; his general appearance of a Cavalier's portrait; his look at the girl, his mood, a slightly different way he'd had his hair (longish) and his little Vandyke beard trimmed since I saw him last, the clothes he was wearing. . . .

Of course nine girls out of ten never notice a man's ordinary clothes. Evening-dress they recognize; and, of course, flannels, because those are white, and allow the man (especially after a hard game) to look a decent shape if he is one. Anything else is lost on them. But I'm the tenth girl. As Major Montresor once said, when he was huffy with me for telling him his new Norfolk jacket was "too undergraduatey" for him, "Little Monica notices like a valet!"

Sydney's clothes one couldn't *help* noticing; he's so well-turned-out, but never in a stereotyped style; in fact, he refuses to be dressed, as he calls it, "through a stencil." I'm sure he'd rather put on a false nose and walk down St. James's Street in it than appear in that hideous conventional "rig" of the Governor's. To-day, for the Carlton, Sydney wore grey of such an

exquisite soft stuff that it was hard to believe it came from any ordinary man's tailor ; the tie below his bare throat was dove-colour shot with heliotrope, and his silk socks and the line in his shirt with its soft collar matched it exactly. There was one dark Russian violet in his button-hole.

All these details were familiar to me before Sydney so much as cast a glance at our table. Then, in a lull, when I refused coffee, he seemed to prick up his ears. With a quick turn from the girl in blue velvet, he looked straight across and saw me at last.

“ *Monica——!* ”

I heard the quick, delighted, recognizing exclamation break from my old admirer's lips. (*I know he admires me, so why not say so ?*)

For the life of me, I couldn't help raising my eyes and meeting his own fixed upon me.

He half rose. Then his glance fell upon my companion. Mr. Waters was then in the act of putting money down upon the little tray the waiter handed.

And then I saw the expression of eager delight on Sydney's dark, rather dreamy-looking, face give place to a hurt surprise, as he sat back again in his chair.

At the same moment Lady Vandeleur turned quickly, fixing her own gaze upon our table.

Immediately the gaze became a blank stare,

while her exquisitely-pencilled eyebrows rose almost to the edge of her costly "transformation." She'd recognized me, of course. But stony displeasure and outraged convention gleamed in the eyes that she instantly averted.

You see, in her world a girl of my age is not supposed to lunch at the Carlton without a chaperon of some sort, and with an unspecified young man.

Up to this occasion I, Colonel Trant's daughter, had been of that world, of those conventions. The Vandeleurs were evidently shocked at the lapse.

Dear old Sydney, old-fashionedly chivalrous towards women, was also old-fashionedly strict; and his mother—well! she was merely glad of the excuse to cut me.

Under the circumstances I need not have minded. But one is not consistent. I minded horribly the idea of what they might be thinking about me—that I had become horrid, forward, fast.

Something that seemed as hard and hot as a baked paving-stone seemed to settle between my chest and my throat as I fumbled at the last button of my long white gloves, and, in answer to Mr. Waters' business-like "Ready, Miss Trant?" I rose to follow him out.

Lady Vandeleur's tortoiseshell-handled lorgnette rose also. I saw her turn a searching

scrutiny upon my blond, glossily-groomed, well-to-do looking escort.

Again a horrible hint of what she might be thinking of me passed through my mind. She knew I worked now in the City ; she would think —Sydney would think—I had made it an excuse for “picking up” the attentions of a wealthy business-man, perhaps my employer. From every point of view it is considered “bad form” for the head of a firm to have anything to say to his typist out of business-hours.

All this she would say to Sydney, and to that girl. No, I couldn’t stand that ! There seemed only one thing in the world for me to do. “I’m forced into it,” I thought rapidly, “so here goes.”

I touched Mr. Waters’s sleeve, murmuring :
“Please wait a moment.”

He stopped, looking down at me inquiringly. I turned, smiling, to that slim, expensively-gowned figure of outraged propriety at the other table. I accosted her as if I thought she had not seen me.

“Lady Vandeleur, don’t you know me ? ”

My own voice sounded strangely artificial in my ears, but, thank goodness, it was steady enough, with every syllable distinct.

“Will you allow me to introduce Mr. Waters, my fiancé ? ”

There ! It was said !

Transformation scene upon that carefully-preserved face at the table ! Gone, vanished, was the icy displeasure. A radiant smile, a gracious bow to the imperturbable Mr. Waters met my announcement. An effusive clasp of both my own hands.

“ My dear child, what surprising, what delightful news ! How glad I am for you,” cooed Lady Vandeleur.

How glad she was for herself—glad to think that a hopelessly ineligible girl, for whom Sydney had always displayed a regrettable weakness, was now safely out of harm’s way—and his !

Her gratification at this made her quite as affectionate as she had been in the days when the Trant family was still worth marrying into.

“ So long since we heard anything of you, you naughty child ! But this quite makes up. Yes, we *were* away ; but there were alterations in our plans”—with a quick gesture, a quick glance, towards the pretty débutante opposite to her, evidently her latest “ plan ” for Sydney. “ Now we are back in town for the season. The old address, you know, in Belgrave Square. Wednesday is my afternoon. Now, promise you will come and see us. A ‘ soon ’ Wednesday, mind ! Do bring your *fiancé* ! ”

“ I shall be delighted.” It was the Governor’s imperturbable voice that answered her. At that moment I could not have spoken.

For as Sydney was murmuring conventional congratulations I had caught sight of the look in his eyes. They are handsome eyes, deep and brown and soft, like the eyes of some spaniels ; and just then they looked so bitterly hurt that I felt as if I had been cruel to some nice dog or some helpless child. Perhaps Sydney cared more than I had ever imagined.

I felt quite miserable when at last the purring farewells and the "so very glad, dear childs" were left behind us, and we passed out of the restaurant, through the wheeling glass doors into the Haymarket once more.

As we walked up to Piccadilly Circus I turned to the Governor with the apologies I felt I owed him.

"I'm so very sorry, Mr. Waters ! There seemed nothing else to be done. Those people —they were old friends of my father's ; they would have thought it so odd for me to be lunching alone with you."

"Oh, quite so, quite so !" put in the Governor, matter-of-fact and reassuring. "I quite realized the situation."

Did he ?

Not all of it ! Poor Sydney ! I have never felt nearer the possibility of falling in love with Sydney in my life. But the Governor was still speaking.

"In fact, I was not at all sorry that the occasion

happened to come up. It means, of course, that the announcement will have to be made rather earlier."

"Oh, yes," I agreed, with the usual sinking of the heart.

We had reached the Circus now, and before I knew what he was going to do, Mr. Waters had stepped quickly across to those sailor-hatted, shawled flower-women, whose baskets make such a gorgeous splash of colour against the stone background of the fountain.

Back he came with a cluster of great red, fragrant carnations, which he handed to me.

"Oh, but really you should not have—" I was beginning, when I realized that this also was part of the business—that never had flowers been offered from man to maid under quite such unromantic circumstances before, and that I had better take Still Waters' gift as ostentatiously as I could.

I tucked the sweet crimson blooms into the breast of my blue serge coat.

As we whizzed citywards in a taxi, the Governor spoke again.

"Now, Miss Trant, there is another suggestion I have to make to you," he began. "To begin with, if I may say so, I like the way you dress."

Crisp, concise, business-like syllables; no girl could have interpreted them into a *compliment*!

"I like the way you go to business—always neat, always ladylike. No earrings, no dingle-dangles and low necks like some of them ; always a very clean collar and a quiet tie, I notice—just the thing for the office. But when I take you out rather more, I suppose you will have to have one or two rather special evening gowns and afternoon frocks, and theatre-wraps, and so on. I don't know what they're called. No doubt you know the kind of thing to order. All part of the arrangement, you understand. I'll get a friend of mine in the City, whose wife runs a really first-class dressmaking business, to let me have the address ; and then you will go to her—"

All cut-and-dried, like all his other schemes ! But this was something different—very different, as well.

—"have yourself fitted out with all that is necessary, and send in the bills to me."

"Please, no. Not that," I heard myself say quickly.

My employer turned upon me a face with some of the imperturbability quite jerked out of it by surprise.

"What's that ? "

"If you don't mind, I can't—I would rather not do so as you suggest about that," said I, holding my head very high, but feeling myself turn as crimson as the flowers in my coat, and

speaking rather shakily, for this was the first time I had ever asserted my own feelings in even the mildest way before him. “I—I know it seems like straining at a gnat after all the camels that I am preparing to swallow. Of course I will *get* the frocks and things. Only—please, you must allow me to pay for them out of my allowance—my salary.”

He looked at me doubtfully.

“That seems scarcely fair—to you. It means paying out your own money on things, that—well! I thought that would obviously come out as ‘*business expenses*.’”

I said, feeling miserably uncomfortable, “Don’t you see that I can’t possibly allow you to pay for—to give me *frocks*? ”

“But—don’t you understand that—in the way of business, you will have to allow me to give you other things? ”

“Other things? What? ”

“Why, presents. I don’t know what, exactly. You will probably have to come round the shops with me yourself, and tell me. You are the best judge of what a girl would like to show, as gifts, keepsakes, what-nots, from the man to whom she is, presumably, engaged. It is part of this affair! ” explained Mr. Waters, a little impatiently, as the taxi was held up at a crossing and waited panting for the signal to get on. “It would ‘look odd,’ as you

yourself expressed it once, if I did *not* offer you presents."

"Presents," I said, feeling really indignant with him for being so obtuse, "are very different. For one thing, I should not have to keep *them* always. They would go back to you at the end of the year, as soon as that paper I signed for you is torn up. But—girls don't take *clothes* as presents, *ever!*!"

"I don't see why not," he said obstinately. "Besides—don't they! A cousin of my own, a girl" (fancy his having a girl-cousin!) "who was staying with us last winter used to wear a magnificent stole and a muff of leopard-skin—the leopards had been shot by her *fiancé*."

"Those were *furs*," I explained. "Furs are different."

"A great many things would seem to be 'different' from what I imagined," he said, in a tone of voice that was almost petulant. I felt inclined to say, "Yes! *You* imagined that because you're as infallible as a tape-machine in business-hours, you can't make mistakes outside the office!"

Whereas Sydney Vandeleur, who has no "business" outside his amateur art criticism, with an occasional design for hand-wrought jewellery, would never have made the *faux pas* this man had done. It was so absurdly ignorant

and *gauche* of him not to see it. And even now he seemed inclined to dispute the point.

"Feathers, now," he said a little satirically. "Might not a girl wear a couple of really good, expensive ostrich plumes, or whatever you call them—the things that hang down the back like a sort of Niagara of fluff—if they were sent to her by a man with facilities for buying direct from South Africa?"

"Oh, yes," I said readily, feeling as if I were an editress answering "*Queries on Etiquette*." "Feathers are *quite* as permissible as furs."

"Even supposing them to be very costly? Worth as much, say, as five times the amount of the rest of the lady's wardrobe?"

"It's nothing to do with the cost," I explained patiently. "A twenty-guinea fox stole a girl *might* accept from a man. A four-pound frock she *couldn't*."

"I confess I don't understand these *nuances*," said Mr. Waters, almost absent-mindedly.

I said, "Any girl would."

"Possibly. I can't help wondering what held good instead of the fur-and-feathers edict in the days when they composed— What I was going to say," he broke off quickly, "was that I always imagined that young French girls were brought up to be more strict in these matters than English ones. Yet I know a French girl—"

(Surprising! He knows a girl!)

—“her father’s an old business acquaintance of mine—”

(Ah, that explains it.)

—“and neither her father nor the young lady seemed to find anything curious about the matter, when, in payment of some bet made at a flying-meeting, I bought her quite a large boxful of pairs of gloves.”

“Oh, gloves ! Anybody can give gloves to anybody,” I told him. “*Gloves* aren’t like clothes.”

“No, but I see some clothes about nowadays that are uncommonly like gloves !”

Could it have been the Governor who muttered this *sotto voce* to himself ?

No ! It must have been the comment that flashed through my own mind, and that I imagined spoken aloud as the burly policeman whose back I had been studying during this interlude dropped his hand and allowed our taxi to whizz forward into the writhing tangle of traffic.

There was no further stopping or talking until at last we reached the imposing entrance of the Near Oriental Shipping Agency offices.

I noticed that the Governor’s level eyebrows rose a trifle as he looked at the indicator of the fares before paying the driver. Yes, I am sure that many fifteen shillings’ worth of taxi-drive haven’t seemed as long. I only hope this

florin's worth was as endless to him as it was to me !

Then, just as I was turning away, my employer surprised me by saying brusquely but quite nicely, " Miss Trant, you must do just as you like in the matter of—of which we've been speaking. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I am sorry if I did—You understand that ? "

" Oh, of course," I said, all meekness again.

And then I set my teeth before I ran up the stairs into the typists' dressing-room and prepared to face the eyes of my three friends, Miss Robinson, Miss Holt and Miss Smith.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT THEY SAID

IN the dressing-room, where Miss Robinson was rinsing out the sooty basin before washing her hands in it, Miss Holt "smarming" her hair-net down over her little brown chocolate of a head, and Miss Smith tearing yet another leaf out of the inevitable book of *papiers poudrés*, the silence that met me was quite as death-like as if the girls had just been pulled up by Mr. Dundonald's "*Talk-ing, ladies!*"

Talking? I didn't need to be told that, *from* the moment they'd seen, out of the landing window, the last of that taxi in which the Governor and his private clerk had driven off, *to* the moment they had heard my returning footstep on the stairs, they had done nothing *but* talk about me and my incredible, my epic lunch.

As I drew the hat-pins from the admired new hat, I prepared for a hurricane of comments and questions.

None came. Not one of the girls seemed to have a word to say to me!

Perhaps they thought they would hear more by seeming not too eager. (That's rather Miss Robinson's style of "drawing out" her companions.)

Perhaps they considered the subject too vast for immediate discussion. Perhaps, for they are all good-natured girls, they had come to the conclusion that it wasn't fair to "rag" me about it—that I might be feeling too utterly nervous and flurried over the unexpected (?) event.

They didn't even ask me whether I had enjoyed myself! I even saw them, distinctly, avoid looking at me.

Only Miss Holt's eyes seemed drawn, as if in spite of herself, to the flowers I was taking out of my coat to put in water in the grimy jam-jar on the dressing-table that so often holds Smithie's bunch of violets; and it was Miss Holt who breathed an involuntary—

"I say, what lovely carnations!"

"Do have some," I said, as a matter of course, dividing the cluster and holding out half to her.

"Oh, no. I wouldn't deprive you for the world, Miss Trant," murmured Miss Holt, stiffly drawing back.

I realized from her tone that she considered I had made a mistake.

Of course! Those flowers ought to have been thought "too precious" to share with anybody. Smithie would never think of giving one of her

"boy's" violets away. Dear me, I thought, what an added bore, having to remember to keep up the correctly sentimental attitude about every trifle of this kind. . . . *Ah!*

I broke off what I was thinking at that moment with quite a sudden start.

For, just as she turned away, I had caught Miss Smith's glance at that cluster of fresh, crimson carnations. It might have been a bunch of withered wall-flowers that had been left too long in water, for the disgusted wrinkle that lifted the prettiest typist's small, powdered nose.

"I wouldn't touch them," it seemed to say.

"Not *those* flowers." . . .

And at last I saw why.

The reason my three colleagues had forbore to question, or chaff, or even look at me when I came in from that expedition with the Governor was *not* because they were too considerate, too puzzled, or too wily.

It was merely because they were shocked—scandalized!

They were thinking worse things of me than I thought I saw behind Lady Vandeleur's lifted lorgnette. I found myself suspected—probably more than suspected!—of having run counter to the standards of a class which is perhaps more innately virtuous than Lady Vandeleur's and my own and Cicely's, and certainly more rigid in its judgments. I

remembered gossip about typists and their employers, gossip from the days when I was taking my training at Pitman's. And out of this I could imagine for myself the tone of the talk about me that had passed across that marble-topped table in the "Den of Lyons" at lunch-time.

"Well, Still Waters have been running deep, with a vengeance! This is the meaning of her taking down his letters for a whole fortnight—*without any complaints*, girls! We might have seen there was something funny in that!"

"She's been pretty artful, too, not letting on that there was anything at all, until to-day!—And there must have been some sort of beginning. A girl's boss doesn't take her out to a swagger lunch, with flowers and a new hat and all, without there's been some sort of a leading up to it!"

Perhaps Miss Robinson might suggest—"Well, I should never have thought she'd been that kind of girl. Fact of the matter is, I suppose she funk'd losing her job if she didn't."

But Smithie and Miss Holt would chorus vehemently, "She ought to have lost her job, first! I would!—And chance it!"

Yes; according to this jury of maidens, I was already pronounced "*Guilty.*"

And, innocent as I was of anything they would have thought "mattered" in the least

—for I don't think the keeping-up of a false engagement would have outraged their conventions at all in comparison—I felt myself turn hot and cold with shame over the false position.

I was even thankful not to have to stay in the same room with these other girls that afternoon—thankful to be able to beat a retreat to the large, light office where I took down letters from the Governor's rapid dictation as if my whole life depended on it—thankful that he did make such claims on the whole of my attention and capabilities; thankful that the boring "dinner-partner," who had allowed a glimpse of a slightly more human personality in the cab when he'd discussed the difference between frocks and furs, had been entirely swallowed up again in the business-employer.

As he was leaving, he gave me the last of his orders for the following day.

"I should be glad if you would have lunch with me again to-morrow."

"Very well, Mr. Waters."

That means another ordeal in the dressing-room, where the ill-ventilated atmosphere will again be set simmering with the unspoken—and the unspeakable. I never did think that this ten pounds a week was going to be exactly easy to earn. But I hadn't bargained for this—

This is outrageous! It makes me hate everybody: Mr. Waters, to begin with, for making the proposal; Jack next, for making it necessary for me to accept it; the girls at the office here, for so hideously misconstruing the position!

My ordinary work, which had for two or three hours pushed my complicated "supernumerary duties" to the back of my mind, has come to an end, and the other thing looms well into the foreground again. I've walked nearly all the way back to Battersea, but that hasn't worked off my simmering indignation even yet.

I shall spend the evening ironing out washing-ribbon and oddments in our tiny kitchen; I can't stay with Cicely—I should only snap at her, and she would wonder why.

The one relief that I have been able to give to my feelings was when, in crossing the bridge, I tore those glorious crimson carnations (which I wouldn't leave at the Near Oriental!) out of my coat again, and flung them far, far down into the sluggish brown waters of the river below me. How soon they were out of sight! How I wish that I could put them and everything connected with them, out of mind!

To-day, the day of my second lunch with Mr. Waters, has been one that I don't think I shall ever forget, even when I'm a white-haired maiden-lady, with no one to lunch with but

a parrot or a tabby-cat, and no man's "appointments" to consult but those of the individual who has to pay me over my Old Age Pension !

Silence—a silence that ought to have rejoiced the heart of Mr. Dundonald, reigned throughout the whole long morning. I knew that the girls meant me to realize that Miss Trant, for outraging the code of the self-respecting business-girl, had been "sent to Coventry."

This was what helped me to that stiffness of spine, that Suffragette-like defiance of eye, and that unnatural clearness of diction which I felt myself assuming at one o'clock in the dressing-room as I announced, "I think it is at the Savoy that I am lunching with Mr. Waters to-day." For I flung it down like a gauntlet.

It was Miss Robinson who accepted the challenge with a particularly icy "Gracious!"

The two others stared hard; while Miss Robinson, clearing her throat, fixed her shrewd eyes on me and plucked up courage to add what Smithie and Miss Holt were probably thinking.

"Miss Trant! D'you mind me asking you if you're going out with Mr. Waters because you like it, or because you can't say 'No'?"

"Who would say 'No'?"—I fenced flippantly—"to a Savoy lunch?"

"Some girls might," murmured Miss Smith. Miss Robinson, answering not my words, but my

tone, said, "Of course it's none of my business—except that while you're here you are supposed to be one of us. And I can't say——"

"Can't say what?" I demanded, meeting her shrewd eyes squarely with my defiant ones. She flushed a little, and I was glad. But she stuck to her guns.

"I can't say that it looks any too well! A man in his position, and a girl in yours! Under those circumstances——"

"You know nothing," I said, deliberately and coldly, "about the circumstances."

Still more deliberately I tossed a glance into the inevitably soap-splashed mirror at the set of my hat. Then, without another word, I turned out of the open door and walked to the lift, humming a tune just loud enough for them all to hear.

This time I didn't trouble to glance up from the entrance, where my employer joined me, to the landing window. The girls would not be watching me off this time.

"Savoy!"

The taxi-driver touched his peaked cap with a quite unusual suggestion of deference. I suppose he had found Savoy luncheon-escorts were generous tippers. I wondered if he had ever before driven a couple in quite these "circumstances."

Miss Robinson's sincerely-meant reproof, "*It doesn't look any too well! A girl in your position. A man in his!*" echoed in my ears louder than the whirring of the wheels and the noise of the traffic. It rankled poisonously throughout the drive, throughout the whole luncheon.

We lunched outside, which Mr. Waters said laconically would be "more amusing for me than inside." Personally I felt that nothing would ever amuse me less than this duty-lunch with its hateful obbligato-accompaniment of what those other girls were thinking, what they were saying.

Oh, it's all very well to quote that French axiom—

"*They say—What do they say?—Let them say!*" The average person will always find that a counsel of perfection.—Especially the average girl. The impulse *not* to let them "say" if we can help it is nearly as strong in us as the instinct of self-preservation, and of touching our hair when we pass a mirror. So that there must be some really important basic reason for it. I do wish I knew what would happen if that suddenly crumbled away. . . ?

But it isn't "away" yet: it spoiled every trace of amusement that I might otherwise have enjoyed in the lunch and the people that passed. I've merely a vague impression of cab-whistles, of taxis whirling up beyond the trellis

of the low balustrade, of obviously American figures appearing and disappearing among the evergreens ; of a small, unhappy-looking face with dark eyes that stared resentfully at me out of the bowls of spoons, and of a voice that said half-absently, "I'm afraid you've made a very poor lunch, Miss Trant."

"Oh, not at all."

"Perhaps you are tired ? "

"Oh, not in the least, thank you."

"Not too tired to come on somewhere ? I thought if you didn't mind"—this always preludes an order—"we'd drive to Gemmer's in Bond Street, and choose that ring for you."

"Ring ?" I repeated vaguely, as I put on my gloves.

"You will have to have one, you know. An engagement ring, as the outward and visible sign of the new conditions," he said nonchalantly, as we rose. "Must have a ring to clinch the effect !"

Yes, I thought resentfully, that "clinches" it—for him. He doesn't think of my side of the affair at all ! He doesn't see that his accurately mapped-out time-table includes any unpleasantness—just because *he* doesn't choose to admit it !

I turned to him as we sat in the cab. I felt like "the turning worm" as I pulled myself together for what I meant to say.

CHAPTER VII

CHOOSING THE RING

"ABOUT that—engagement ring, Mr. Waters—"

"Yes?"

"You want me to take to wearing it, as soon as you have got it, I suppose?"

"That's the idea," he said, turning a little to look at me while I stared straight at the big white-and-blue buses lumbering up the Strand, but saw, clearer than the traffic, the faces of Miss Robinson, Miss Holt, and Smithie wearing that partly contemptuous, but more angry, expression with which I suppose a decent Trades-Unionist on strike might be entitled to look down upon a blackleg. "Yes, of course it's for you to wear at once. What else?"

"And—to show the others?"

"Of course!" He looked still more surprised; a little impatient, too. I suppose he felt that again an irritating spoke was being thrust into the well-oiled wheel of his plan.

"I am to show it to them and let them know, in that way, that I am supposed to be engaged to you?"

He answered this with another question.

"Tell me, Miss Trant, have you been having any unpleasantness in the office about this—coming out to lunch with me?"

"N-no," I said. "Of course," I added more quickly, "it's been awkward! You could not expect it *not* to have been awkward—at least, for me!"

"Ah? Made awkward for you by those girls—what?"

"No! Oh, no!" I fibbed swiftly. For again I could conclude his comment with that relentless "*Well, then, they can go!*" And I couldn't have the girls sacked, calmly as I felt I could have seen them all three strangled an hour before. "Only—a little difficult to explain."

"This will explain it," said my employer coolly, as the taxi stopped outside the glass door of the great jeweller's. A page-boy in green-and-silver swung it open for us. And Mr. Waters made me precede him into the softly-carpeted shop with the long glass counters and the white velvet stands curved to the shape of a woman's neck, on which winked and flashed, gleamed and glowed, diamonds—rubies—pearls—jewels of every description.

"The sight of flowers soothes and softens a woman's mood. Jewels, on the other hand, stimulate, excite and irritate her. Possibly because they generally signify longings unattainable, combined with the knowledge that, given *that* necklace, or gems like those, or *such* a pair of ear-rings, and any beauty she has would be tenfold increased." . . . That is how Sydney Vandeleur explained it to me. He's interested in jewels ever since he won that Arts and Crafts competition for the design of a girdle in silver, mother-o'-pearl, and peridot. And Cicely, of the red curls, once confessed that she would marry an octogenarian if he could give her a really lovely rope of black pearls !

But that was in fun. This was business. . . .

A small, olive-faced shopman in a frock-coat and with curls like a retriever's back bowed over the counter and flashed his teeth at us. Mentally I nicknamed him Mr. Levi Smarm. It would have taken all Miss Robinson's powers of mimicry to reproduce the suavity of his "Sir ? What may I have the pleasure ? "

"We want to see some rings," said my employer brusquely.

"Engagement rings, sir, of course ? "

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Waters, fixing a cold granite-grey stare just above the retriever's back—or rather, the jeweller's head. "Now—"

I felt that he had nearly rapped out his usual “Now, Miss Trant!” but checked himself under the sympathetically intrusive eye of that Jewish salesman as he turned to me—“what stones do you prefer?”

“I? Oh! What does it matter?—I mean, I don’t mind in the least!”

I was remembering things that various girl-friends had told me, in the old days, of the choosing of their engagement rings; of various rings I had seen. One girl, whose *fiancé* had gipsy blood in his veins, had chosen a gipsy’s silver wedding-ring. Another had a tiny enamel circlet with the posy:

*“The Gift is Small
But Love is All.”*

If I *were* the falling-in-love type of girl, which thank goodness I’m not, this scene at Gemmer’s, so utterly opposed to all canons of Romance and tradition, might have seemed a “desecration”—might have got thoroughly on my nerves.

But what *was* on my nerves, which actually were jangled enough for the moment, was—first, the attitude of the girls towards me ever since I came back from the Carlton yesterday—and, secondly, the Governor’s blind tactlessness, his intention of turning me loose among them, so to speak, alone, to flaunt his ring on my finger!

A positive rage against Still Waters boiled up in me as suddenly as hot milk in the saucepan when you don't watch it. So, when he suggested, casually, "Let us say diamonds, then, shall we?" I heard myself retort quickly, almost before I knew what I meant:

"Yes, diamonds. Diamonds are always money afterwards, you know!"

As soon as it was out of my mouth I realized that it was an appalling thing to say under any circumstances. Mr. Levi Smarm, however, seemed to consider it an extremely witty remark.

He threw back his curly head and laughed quite pleasantly as he suggested that surely the young lady was not thinking of an "afterwards" already?

"It is always well to be provided for every contingency," put in Mr. Waters dryly. "I should like to see those diamond rings in that show-case over there, please."

"There" was at the other end of the shop—which meant that our salesman had to turn his frock-coated back upon us, and that he was out of earshot of the next remarks between his "newly-engaged" customers.

"Miss Trant!"—the Governor spoke curtly and hurriedly—"What was your meaning just now when you said that 'diamonds were always money afterwards'?"

"Well—I—I understood that they were!"

Perhaps I ought not to have said it with the man there. I meant that you would not lose anything on it when I return that ring to you in a year's time from now!"

"Who said anything about 'returning' the ring when the so-called engagement is up?" asked Mr. Waters, looking directly at me.

I was aghast.

"But . . . naturally I send it back!"

"I had not intended that at all. You will have . . . expenses connected with this affair—railway-journeys, and so on, I mean." He *meant* clothes again, I suspect, but could not say so. "I intended whatever value the ring might have to stand for those."

"Thank you," I said, nearly boiling up again. "In that case I won't have diamonds, please."

"This is a very pretty design, madam," insinuated the returning Mr. Smarm. "The colour of these stones is very beautiful."

"Yes, but I don't think I'm going to have diamonds," I persisted, feeling quite amazed at my own boldness. I meant, however, to carry my point. "I'd rather have pearls—opals——"

"Very seldom a young lady chooses opals for her engagement ring," smiled the shopman. "That superstition against opals loses our firm thousands of pounds' business a year; the majority of ladies considering them so unlucky."

"I am not superstitious," I said. "I would

like—I am going to have an opal ring, with very small stones in it."

"We are going to have diamonds," remarked my employer quietly. "Fetch me some other diamond rings to look at."

"I would rather not have them," I urged, in the temporary absence of the black curls and white teeth.

"And I would rather that you had," ordered my employer. "After all, diamonds are the show-stones; everybody notices them. They look so unmistakably *like* an engagement, don't you see?"

"Yes—I see," I said reluctantly, my nerves feeling more jangled than ever. "But, Mr. Waters, if I must have them, I shall insist upon sending back that ring when—"

"When the time comes we can discuss that," the Governor cut me short just as Mr. Levi Smarm bent over us with his wave-offering of jewels on a tray. "Yes. That's a good one, that big fellow with the stones going nearly all round. Those seem a fine colour."

"A perfect colour, sir; perfectly matched. I am sure that you will—"

"Try it on," said Mr. Waters, holding the winking, flashing circlet out to me.

I pulled off my left-hand glove, but here the suave shopman, evidently accustomed to shopping couples who showed more appreciation

of his sympathy and understanding, interposed again.

"Oh, pardon me, sir, but that will never do. That would be most incorrect! No young lady would keep on an engagement ring that had not been first slipped on to her finger by her fiancé himself!"

Mr. Waters' glance of contempt at the shopman would have shrivelled up the entire staff at the Near Oriental. But several little things had shown me already that the man who is a Grand Mogul in his own offices can go down several degrees in importance when he leaves the City. Mr. Levi Smarm met that glance with another flashing smile, and evidently waited for us to take this last hint on bridal or betrothal etiquette as it was meant.

I believe Mr. Waters was going to do so. A slight shrug of his broad, sloping shoulders seemed to say, "We may as well have everything *en règle* while we're about it," as he turned to me. But I wasn't going to have any masquerading "frills" about this business that could possibly be avoided, and this particular development in our "romance" *was* avoidable. I said very quickly and decidedly, "Oh, but I don't believe in anything of *that* sort, you know." Then quietly I took the ring, before he knew what I was about, out of my employer's hand, and slipped it on to my own "wedding-finger."

There was a faint purple smudge off a new ribbon on my knuckle just above the ring. I couldn't help thinking how entirely characteristic of the whole affair this was: the stain of my daily labour, showing side by side with these wonderful stones—that must also be worn as part of the gaining of my daily bread.

The ring fitted as if measured for me.

"You wish me to keep this?" I said briskly to the Governor.

"Yes, I think that one will do perfectly," he replied; and he turned to the young jeweller again.

It was to ask the price, I knew. I was seized with that ineradicable feeling of distress that claims a woman under any circumstances whatsoever—when mention is made of payment for her, by another. She loves to be paid for—with all thought of price ignored. So I rose and turned to bend over another glass counter under which gleamed pendants of pearls and emeralds—which I scarcely saw, for another couple had strayed into the shop—a plainish girl, simply and rather dowdily dressed; a man like dozens of others—and they interested me. Their two faces were as radiant as if they had come into a fortune sufficient to buy up the whole of Gemmer's six times over, but I heard the girl whisper, awestruck and ecstatic, "Oh, Harry, no! I *won't* let you! It's *absurd*, for people like us." . . .

"People like us aren't going to be married every day! Considering I nearly wrecked my constitution and made myself unspeakably ill-tempered by giving up smoking for eight months," growled the young man, "just to save up enough to *be* absurd, you won't catch me wasting it on being *sensible*."

"I'll write you out the cheque now, and wait while you ring up my bank, then," the Governor's voice was saying; then came purrs from Mr. Levi Smarm, of "Shall not detain you a moment, sir. . . . Thank you, sir; perfectly all right. Much obliged. *Good afternoon, sir*" (with a bend to the waist). "*Good afternoon, madam*" (with an even lower bend). Then he turned the eyes and teeth and curls on the young couple who had saved up to be "absurd." I wondered whether he would notice the difference between them and—his last customers. Probably. Ah, but he could hardly be expected to know quite *what* it was!

"I hope," said Mr. Waters, civilly, on our way back to the office, "that that little Hebrew bounder didn't annoy you. That sort of thing is all part of his business, you understand."

"Of course I understand," said I submissively.

"I am glad you—didn't mind it," said Mr. Waters.

I longed to be able to retort, "*Mind?* Why

on earth should I? Please try to understand that there's no reason I need 'mind,' any more than one of those curved white velvet stands at Gemmer's should mind whose hand clasps and unclasps the necklace of amethysts and peridots that it displays. I'm quite content to let my finger be a 'stand,' to show off these diamonds, for which—for some unexplained reason—you've got to pay someone to be the 'official' wearer! All I 'mind' is the way you do these things—it's clumsy beyond belief!"

One comfort that remains to me is that I need only wear this hateful ring of his while I *am* on show—and not at other times.

No tightly-corseted Victorian has ever so longed to be alone in her bedroom again and undo her torturing case of whalebone and coutil as I shall long to get away, every time I'm wearing this "engagement" ring—to the mere pleasure of taking it off!

CHAPTER VIII

THE ENGAGEMENT IS ANNOUNCED !

"TEN past three, by Jove; later than I thought again," muttered my employer as we reached the office again. "And I've got all those letters to get through yet. . . . Miss Trant, I shall have to ask you to come straight through to my room, please, and take these down at once, as I'm off early this afternoon."

So, still in my hat and coat, I walked straight through to Mr. Waters' own office, sat down at the clerk's table, and stripped off my gloves to the afternoon's work. (It's alarming to see how "twice-on" white gloves become impossible in London. I'm afraid quite a lot of my hard-earned ten pounds a week will go on those items alone, now that I'm constrained to lunch at these haunts of the well-dressed !)

All through the stress of following the Governor's top-speed dictation with my scurrying shorthand, I was conscious of the bulge of that newly-bought ring—heavy as a door-knob, it seemed now!—on my engagement finger, and

shooting its arrogant glances of orange and emerald and rose-colour over the dull pages of my pad.

I was glad that it had not had to be displayed at once in the dressing-room ; glad of the respite of my hour's toil. But that seemed to come to an end before I had even begun to set my teeth, mentally, to the next ordeal.

—“*and beg to remain, gentlemen, yours, etc.*”—Yes ; that'll do, Miss Trant, thank you,” came the Governor's dismissal.

I put back my chair and stood up. Now for it ! Now for the announcement of this engagement ! I supposed that I need not *begin* by saying a word to those three other girls. I should only have to walk over to my typing-table, sit down and open my machine, and the flash of the electric light on those marvellous stones above the keyboard would draw three pair of eyes upon me at once. Should I have to answer that clamouring gaze, or would the girls put it into questions of so many words ?

“Miss Trant ?—Look, girls !—I say, tell us, tell us ? It's not a joke ? It's an engagement ring all right ? You're not trying to have us on, now ? Are you going to tell us——?”

Whichever way it happened, it was going to be perfectly awful. Never mind. It had got to be. It was part of the price of that five hundred pounds, of Jack's salvation.

"What's the matter, Miss Trant?" asked the Governor, with a quick glance up at me as I passed his chair.

"Nothing, thank you. I am going to let the others know, now, about this"—I moved that detested ring on my hand into another challenging flash. "And I suppose you will require me to-morrow at lunch again?"

"No—yes—that is—About telling the others of this engagement of ours," took up Mr. Waters unexpectedly. "Would you, by any chance, prefer that I did that myself?"

Would I? I nearly gasped with relief! Why couldn't he have seen before what a difference this would make to the situation? There isn't much dignity in it, goodness knows. But this would save some appearance of it, at all events! I said quietly, "If it is the same to you, I certainly should prefer it."

"Then please wait here while I see them. I won't keep you a moment," said Still Waters, and he walked quickly out of the room.

It seemed an hour to me, but I suppose the minute-hand of the round-topped clock on the broad marble mantelpiece had only moved on two steps before the door opened again to admit my employer.

"That's all right," he told me, with his succinct nod. "I have announced the 'engagement' to the three other typists, and shall let Mr.

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Dundonald and Mr. Alexander know before I leave. I won't keep you, Miss Trant. Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," I said. "Thank you."

For the first time in my life I really felt like thanking him. And yet he'd only done the most ordinary thing that one would expect the most ordinary man to take as a matter of course. Only the custom-honoured practice of the Near Oriental is to refuse to regard its head as an ordinary man. Of course, he *isn't*. There are advantages in making a presupposition of this kind, perfectly clear from the very start!

Feeling comparatively at ease and my own mistress again, I entered the typists' room with my head as high as it had been when I marched out to the lift at lunch-time after Miss Robinson's voicing of what they all thought of me.

Miss Robinson, with her shrewd face startled into the likeness of someone much younger and less astute, broke away from the other two—they had been all three chattering and knotted up together in the corner by the cupboard where the tea-things are kept—and came frankly towards me.

"Well, Miss Trant ! *Here's* some news we've just had sprung on us," said she, speaking as if she found great difficulty in sorting out her words. "I must say—well, really ! Gracious !

Are you going to shake hands and let us congratulate you, as I suppose is the right thing, or are you feeling wild with me about this morning? We didn't know, you know. We never dreamed——! How was anyone to guess, after all——!”

“ Of course you couldn't,” I said, shaking hands with one after the other. “ And of course I'm not feeling ‘ wild ! ’ ” My revenge was to hand if I wanted it. But somehow I didn't feel it would be worth it, now. Though, as a matter of fact, the reminder of what I had felt that morning had brought some of it surging back over me again. And this feeling was not improved by the wording of little Miss Holt's felicitations.

“ ‘ Wild ? ’ I should think Miss Trant was ready to pat herself on the back for the next week, eh ? Who'd 'a thought of this, that day we were all trying to buck her up at lunch when she was afraid she was going to get the sack ? Didn't I say then, though, that Miss Trant would do all right because she'd got a taking way with men ? But—the Governor himself—that we never did look upon as just a ‘ man ! ’ Well, you never can tell ! ”

“ I shall never try to, after *this* afternoon,” announced Miss Robinson. “ Not after his marching in at that door there, and saying, in quite a human sort of voice—not his own voice at

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all—that is, you'll excuse me, Miss Trant ! You know what I mean !—saying, ‘*I have some news to tell you ladies. Miss Trant and I are engaged to be married !’*”

“Married to the head of the firm—my hat !” breathed Miss Holt, devouring me with her eyes, as if she thought that by staring hard enough she might discover the secret of how one achieved this giddy height. “Too grand to speak to any of us after this ! Look at that ring of hers ! Think of all *that* means !”—

Yes ! If she only could !

—“No more turning out to get to business every morning, wet or dry, with the mud still stiff on your skirt that you haven't had time to brush ! No more lining up with the crowd to wait for that beastly old workman's tram at the ‘Elephant !’ No more strap-hanging ! No more packed motor-buses with flower-women, and goodness knows what, shoving their baskets into you and trampling on your feet as they get in !” She took breath, and then, for fear one of the others should interrupt before she finished this harangue upon the Dignity of Labour, she hurried on—“No more having to keep on at it if you *are* ready to drop and your eyes popping out of your head—no more A.B.C. girls not taking the slightest notice of your order and *then* giving you sauce because you've waited half an hour for your lunch—no more slaving from har'-past nine

to six for *her* any more! . . . I suppose you know you're *most awfully lucky?*"

"In some ways," murmured Miss Smith softly. "But having stacks of money and never having to work again isn't *everything!*"

And the dreamy look that came into her eyes irritated me worse than the loudly-expressed envy of the other girl. Miss Holt's type of mind, that cares only for the things that she can see and handle and wear and eat and drink, is so much easier to tackle than an *un-practical* person's point of view. I'm glad I'm rather like Miss Holt, myself. These sentimental people are too tiresome!

I simply couldn't help one snap at Miss Smith as I turned to her.

"I suppose *nothing's* '*everything*' except wasting *years* waiting for Love in a flat? I suppose you despise any hard-up girl who's sick of the struggle and who marries for comfort and a home?"

"I don't despise anybody, Miss Trant, as it happens!" protested Smithie, facing me with the sudden defiance of a mild nature touched in its tenderest spot. "*You* didn't ought to speak sarcastically to me, just because *you* can get married at once instead of waiting—years—till he can afford——"

"Well, and you needn't despise me for that other reason, at all events," I said, a little

mollified by the tears that were now welling up in the dreamy eyes, "for, whatever else I may be going to do, Miss Smith, I am not going to marry Mr. Waters for his money!"

I didn't add that I shouldn't ever marry him at all, but that his money was quite good enough to get engaged to him on. However, had I openly announced this, I don't think she could have looked more surprised.

"Not for his money—marry him for *love*, then? *Him?*" screamed little Miss Holt before she could stop herself. Then she clapped her hand over her wide-open mouth, another involuntary gesture, caused partly, I suppose, by the impulse to keep back anything further that might offend me, and partly by the appearance at the door of Mr. Dundonald.

It was to everybody's amazement that this was not immediately followed by the inevitable "*Talk-ing, ladies!*" and the scowl.

But an extensive smile creased Mr. Dundonald's shut fist of a face into unfamiliar lines of benevolence; he beamed upon us all as he announced in a voice as suavely unfamiliar as the smile, "Miss Trant! I am sorry to interrupt your conversation, but Mr. Waters would be much obliged if you would go back to his room again for a moment, as he wishes to say a few words to you!"

"Oh, certainly," I said, wondering what in

the world this additional “order” might be. The girls didn’t “wonder.” I know they thought it was for another good-bye—especially Smithie, one-idea’d simpleton! I felt her demure little smile in the small of my back as I turned to the door. Mr. Dundonald—oh, unprecedented occurrence!—held it open for me, murmuring, as I passed out, “Miss Trant! May I be permitted to proffer my very heartiest good wishes on the occasion of this—this delightful announcement?”

“Oh! Thank you so much,” I said pleasantly. (“Worm!” I thought.)

So the Governor had told Mr. Dundonald while I was receiving the congratulations of my colleagues. . . .

I saw in his eye—grey, fishy, and always looking as if “the Main Chance” were plainly visible just ahead of any person he addressed—that already my personality had changed from that of the twenty-five-shillings-a-week typist, clad in her “all-I’ve-got” serge costume and liable to dismissal at his hands, to that of young Mrs. William Waters, who, gorgeous in silk, satin and sables, would one of these days be calling at the office to pick up the head of the firm and to motor him home with her! Mr. Dundonald’s new manner was a forecast of his reception of me when that day should dawn!

If *he* only knew!

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"Sorry to trouble you again," said the Governor as I presented myself before him once more. "I forgot, in the middle of all that other business"—this, I suppose, might have applied to either the dictating of his letters, or the choosing of his betrothal ring—"to tell you that I intend to let my mother know, tonight, about this engagement of ours."

"Oh, yes."

"You will probably hear from her to-morrow, inviting you to stay at our house—it's near Sevenoaks. You had better send in your formal resignation to the office at once, and make your arrangements to come on for a fortnight's visit or so, in a few days. Will that be convenient to you ? "

"Oh, perfectly," I said obediently, hoping that I did not show any outward symptoms of that sick feeling of panic that possessed me. To stay at the Governor's house ? So soon ? Horrors ! With the Governor's mother ? What *will* she be like ? Exactly like him, probably, only far more forbidding ; women can always be more alarming than even the most terrifying of men. An elderly feminine edition of Still Waters ! Ye gods ! And she will hate me, of course ; look upon me as that designing minx of a typist who had "got round " her son in business-hours and prevented him from "doing well for himself " in some other direction.

People with money always want their children to marry people with more! It will be Lady Vandeleur over again, only worse. How appalling! Perhaps she will make herself as disagreeable to me as possible, in the hope of inducing me to feel that I should never be able to stand such a mother-in-law, and that I should simply have to break it off!—which, under the circumstances, I'm powerless to do!

“And—er—that will be all, this afternoon, thank you. You will hand your notes of my letters to Mr. Alexander. If you have arrangements to make, you can leave as early as you choose to-day.”

“Thank you, Mr. Waters.”

Feeling that I couldn't have stood another minute of him and his “arrangements,” I walked quickly out of the room and down the passage.

Round a corner, I heard the voice of our office mimic, who had slipped out on some pretext, in full flow of narrating to one of the telephone girls the amazing news that I know was being buzzed all over the Near Oriental offices.

—“but, my dear, the little Trant gives out she's madly in love with him! She says”—here a most successful imitation of my own voice—“‘Whatever else I may be doing, I am NOT marrying him for his money!’”

“P'raps it's for his kind heart and his charm

of manner, I don't think," suggested the telephone girl. "Or his good looks, eh?"

"Nothing actually the matter with his looks, my girl. Anyhow, he does always look as if he went in for no end of cold water, and week-end tramps, and golf, and the windows wide open, and decent soap—*cuticura*, I've smelt it," said Miss Robinson. "And as if he could *beave* things—which nobody else does, in this establishment. And if you *can* get over the general effect of 'the stern-and-solemn-Nelson's column—'"

"Well, I can't. But she's quite pretty if she'd only make a little more *of* herself; p'raps she will now," said the telephone girl, who wears long coral drop-earrings and pins brown-paper cuffs over her sleeves in business-hours. "What on earth do you suppose he said when he proposed to her?"

"Now, Miss Trant, when you have taken down that *Buenos Ayres* order, there is something I have to consult you about personally. Now, Miss Trant, are you prepared to consider—'"

It was so exactly our employer's voice that I, standing there unnoticed, burst out laughing. The girls, caught out, laughed too.

"You didn't know you were the talk of the place, did you, Miss Trant? May as well make up your mind to it," said Miss Robinson. "And do show Miss Harris your ring!"

"I could see it from here. I thought it was something being done to the electric lights. My! but they are sparklers! I shouldn't half swank, wearing jewellery like this. Did you choose it to-day, Miss Trant? My word! Some people do have all the luck. It'll be a very short engagement, I presume?"

"I don't think so," said I, thinking of the nearly twelve complicated and weary months that stretched before me. "Some time yet."

"No doubt any time'll seem long *na-ow*," said the telephone girl archly. "Can't you tell us *about* when it's likely to be?"

Oh, dear! It seemed to me as if I passed through hours of this sort of thing before I could break away and set out for Battersea and our bachelor-girl flat.

Wearily, and without any "spring" left in me, I climbed the four flights of stone steps. I felt positively dragged down by the thought of that awful fortnight with the Governor's mother at their house near Sevenoaks. It had clung to me all the way back. Only as I put my key into the door did I remember something else.

There would be Cicely to break the news of my engagement to, now!

CHAPTER IX

THE LOVER WHO CAME TOO LATE

BUT here, in our flat, I found to my amazement that someone had been before me with the news.

Cicely's marigold-coloured hair and flushed face reared themselves up excitedly from the faded couch cushions as I came in.

"I say ! *Tots* ! What's all this ?—Look here, what *is* the meaning of it ?" she cried breathlessly. "What's this wild story about you being engaged to be married ? Do say it isn't true ;—it can't be ! is it ?"

"Who in the world," I demanded, standing by our rickety old table in the middle of the room and staring at her as she sat up leaning on her elbow, "told you anything about it ?"

"Well, who d'you suppose ? Who would ?"

I glanced quickly at the tray on the table, crowded with the *débris* of what had been tea for two, one saucer piled high with cigarette-ends that told their own tale. Who had been ? One of Cicely's Slade girls ? But how

would *they* know? Whoever it was must have stayed *hours*!

"It was your friend"—Cicely announced this even as the cork hurls itself from an unwired bottle of champagne—"Mr. Sydney Vandeleur!"

"Sydney—he's been here?"

"Well, of course!"

"What on earth for?"

"What *for*, Tots? Why, to see *you*! And, I say! How awfully charming and clever and delightful he is! And so handsome! Such a real artist's head, I call it! *Exactly* like a Vandyke of Charles the First! Oh, my dear! *Don't* tell me you've gone and got engaged to somebody else, when there's such a really *wonderful* person so desperately in love with you!"

"Who says he's in love with me?"

"Why, he does, of course. Didn't you know? You must have. Didn't you?"

"N-no."

Slowly I dropped my gloves and umbrella and vanity-bag and paper on to the table. Of course I have "known," at the back of my mind, all the time about Sydney. But however positive a girl may be that a man cares for her, *until he's told her so she's never certain*. This may sound Irish—to a man. Any girl understands. . . .

To hear the fact proclaimed by Cicely's lips—which really, I do believe, would blurt out

anything that came into her red head!—gave me the same shock of surprise that it would have done even if I'd never received little attentions from Sydney, never heard his neatly-turned compliments, never seen those handsome brown eyes of his fixed upon me in unmistakable admiration, or noticed the blank mask that had suddenly fallen over them yesterday, when I broke to the Vandeleurs the news of my so-called engagement. Cicely went on with her tale, enjoying it thoroughly.

"My dear Tots, you must have known. He's wanted to marry you ever since you were a slip of a schoolgirl with a little proud pearl of a face and that lovely dark hair of yours in a great mane down to your waist. Even then he always meant to propose to you."

"And he tells *you* that? Not me?"

Here I sat down suddenly in the elbow-chair with the one arm "that's always a-comin' off, drat it!" as Mrs. Skinner says.

It came off now.

"*Drat it!*" I quoted, through my teeth, and hurled the broken arm into a corner with a violence that did some—not much—good to my feelings. "He never told me, Cicely."

"Because he was too tactful, too nice. He'd too much fine feeling," she explained eagerly. "He couldn't possibly ask you so soon after the 'smash' in your affairs, and after Colonel Trant's

death, and all. It *would* have looked too much as if he were taking advantage of that to rush the position. He determined to wait until you—until he—well, to wait,” said Cicely. “He saw I was sympathetic; he didn’t mind telling me all this. But he was going to ask you when he and his mother came back from abroad. All the time, he was simply longing to come and carry you off bodily from that hateful typewriter where he kept thinking of you chained, he said, like Andromeda (who *was* she, exactly?) to her rock. Only he just wouldn’t. Wasn’t it *sweet* of him, Tots ! ”

“ To wait and tell all this to another girl ? ”

“ But it was you he was coming round to tell ! ”

“ He didn’t stop to see me.”

“ He *had* to get back to Belgrave Square and dress for a theatre-party of his mother’s.”

“ What he came for at all, after yesterday, I don’t see ! ”

“ It was *about* yesterday he came to see you, Tots ! You see, he says he met you, and you seem to have made him understand that you were engaged to be married.”

“ Well ? Didn’t he believe me ? Did he come round here and sit here filling the place with that abominable reek of Egyptian cigarettes—and, yes ! finishing *all* that nice peach jelly I got in specially for you—to find out whether it was true ? ”

"Is it true, then?" gasped Cicely.

"Yes! I told him so. I told Lady Vandeleur so. I am engaged."

"And not—to *him*!" Cicely seemed utterly unable to grasp how this could be. "What? After all he's said—and *with* his photograph on your dressing-table—not that it's nearly good enough for him! And after what I told him I hoped——"

"What DID you tell him?" I groaned resignedly.

Cicely twisted the long, slender figure, upon which her equally slender salary as a mannequin depends, into a more comfortable curve against the cushions.

"Well! Poor Mr. Vandeleur! When he said he'd seen you lunching at the Carlton alone with a young man, I told him it must be a mistake. You never *did* lunch there, or with young men. It was just what I admired you for, when it's *so* easy to get into the other way of being rather nice to people just for the sake of their giving you a good time and a change from being at work all day! And even though you're not a bit stuffy with me because I sometimes do it, you——"

"Never mind me. What did he say?"

"He said: 'But how *could* there be a mistake? She brought up this self-satisfied-looking individual and introduced him to my mother

as her *fiancé*. She let us congratulate him !' I said, ' Well, but she hasn't got a *fiancé*—or I should have known about it ! I've never heard a syllable. She didn't even tell me she was going out to lunch. She must have been taken out at a moment's notice—by a friend of Jack Trant's, perhaps. Or,' I said, ' it may have been someone she absolutely had to meet, on business !'" she continued vaguely—much she knows about business !—" Getting a better post, or something of that sort. And when she met you unexpectedly, she was flurried, and didn't know how to explain. Is your mother rather particular, or strait-laced ?' Mr. Vandeleur said, ' Very, I am afraid !' So I said, ' Well, that's what must have happened !—Tots, in her nervousness, and not wishing your mother to be shocked, just blurted out '*fiancé*'——'"

" Thank you," I muttered. " I didn't know *I* was a blurter-out !"

" You mean *I* am ! I daresay ! Well, I don't care ! I thought that *must* have been it—I didn't see what else it could have been ! And the poor man was so thirsting to hear anything I could tell him about you, that I should have been a brute not to !" declared my chum, plaintively defiant. " So I just said everything I could—about that photograph, and all ! "

" What photograph ?" I snapped.

"Why, that one of Mr. Vandeleur. I recognized him from that, the moment Mrs. Skinner let him in. And I told him that it was the one and only portrait of a young man that you seemed to possess, and that you always keep it in a silver frame beside your looking-glass. Now, Tots, you can't say you don't!"

No; I couldn't.

"And that cheered him up so, poor fellow! He said—Oh, *isn't* it a tragedy?" interpolated Cicely with zest—"that I'd given him fresh hope to go away with!"

"Fresh fiddlesticks," I muttered, still more savagely.

"You mean there isn't any?"

"I mean," I explained as patiently as I could, "that a girl can't be engaged to two men at once."

"Then *who's* this other, Tots, that you've never said a word about? He can't possibly be fit to hold a candle to—I mean, who *is* it?"

"It is the managing director and head of the firm where I've been working," I told her bluntly. "His name is Mr. William Waters."

"*What?* Not the man you all call '*Still Waters'*? The one you all detest, who's so impossible to please? Engaged to him? Oh, now you're pretending! Tell me, Tots. Of course you are only joking, after all?"

A nice idea of "joking" my chum has got!

"*Does* this look like a joke?" I demanded suddenly. The newly-bought diamonds flashed under her widely-opened eyes. "Don't you admire my engagement ring, Cis?"

Cicely Harradine's soft bud of a face faded from pink to pale, and her big eyes clouded dolefully. She said nothing for a moment but "Oh, Tots!" (she's quite as hopeless as Miss Smith). Then, in a tone of the timidest reproach, she faltered, "Mr. Vandeleur *said* he was 'big and blonde and City-fied and extremely prosperous-looking.' I said I'd never seen any friend of yours who was like that. No wonder! The head of the firm! But—Tots!—I should—should hate to think of you, of all girls, marrying anyone because of his—money?"

"Then don't think it. You may do me that justice!" I said sharply. She was nearly as bad in her way as the typists at the Near Oriental had been in theirs—and the same prevarication had to be used to "head off" *her* comments on a marriage for money. After which, the accusation in my chum's big eyes melted suddenly into tears. Impulsively she flung her slim arms round my neck—and I had to let her.

"Forgive me, Tots. Dear old girl, but how *was* I to know? It's all so unexpected, and I never met him, and you never gave me a hint! I *didn't* see how you could possibly prefer anyone to Mr. Vandeleur, who *is* so wonderful! But

of course I know Love's blind—I mean, you can't *make* yourself not care for this Mr. Waters, just because another man wants so badly to marry you! Oh, Tots, it's all my fault, but I'm afraid he's going to write to you about that——”

“Mr. Vandeleur is ? ” (This, too !)

“Yes ! It's all because of what I said to him. I have been putting my foot in it,” she admitted, as if this were quite a new idea to me too, “but *do* forgive me—Since you do really care for this Mr. Waters I'm only too delighted, darling. Oh, I'm so glad for your happiness, you can't think ! When did it happen ? He's *madly* in love with you, of course ? ”

Here I thought grimly of Miss Robinson's version : “*My dears, the little Trant makes out she's madly in love with him !*” All this about two people who, as far as I can make out, have only one thing in common—both being absolutely falling-in-love-*proof* !

Poor, well-meaning, warm-hearted Cicely was still effusing ; eager to make up for her first suspicion that I *wasn't* engaged for the only right reason.

“I ought to have seen ! Of course ! It was he who gave you this extra work about a fortnight ago ? ”

“Exactly ! ” (Extra work with a vengeance ! More than I've bargained for !)

—“And that we were so thankful for, just

when I lost my own job and was ill, and there were all those extra things to get. . . . It was your 'rise' that got them all, I knew. Only I didn't know . . . this other. It *began* then, I suppose, Tots?"

"Yes, it began then."

"How romantic! Well! And I did notice that you've been absent-minded and not saying much these last few days, and I *ought* to have known why it was. *Especially* yesterday. Did HE take you out to lunch again to-day? Oh, doesn't it make the whole world different for you?"

"It makes the menu jolly different, anyhow," I admitted.

"Ah, yes; you may pretend to be as flippant as you like about it, but I know that's 'all put on' to hide what you're really feeling!" declared Cicely.

Such a convenient conviction! I made up my mind, then and there, that this was just the line I should adopt with my chum. And laughing merrily for her benefit, I fled to my own little room.

Here, left to my own thoughts at last, I flung myself down on my creaky little camp bedstead and raged as I reviewed this new aspect of the situation. Put crudely, it is this: It's not *until* I tie myself up with this wretched

sham “engagement” to the Governor that I have the chance of cutting everything to do with him and his odious office, and becoming safely, happily and *genuinely* engaged !

Or, in the jargon of the Near Oriental, it’s just after I’ve sold out at a loss that I get an advantageous offer !

Why on earth couldn’t Sydney Vandeleur have said all that *before* ? A year ago—even a month ago—and to *think* what it would have saved ! I shouldn’t have minded getting that money for Jack—from his own brother-in-law ! Yes ; if he’s cared for me all this time, why couldn’t he have proposed to and married me before I’d so much as seen that hateful Near Oriental, with that “Andromeda’s rock” of a typewriter, watched over by what Miss Holt calls “that Gordian” of a Governor ! Why couldn’t Sydney have hurried up, for once in his life, to play Perseus ?

“Too much tact !” Good gracious ! Why must men have this absurd code of ethics about “the right thing” when there’s a *woman* in the case ? Why does a man who’s hard-up, for instance, consider it so much more “honourable” to “ride away” without a word to the girl whose heart he knows is his, just because he “feels he oughtn’t to propose before he’s in a position to marry ?”

He “feels he ought not to stand in the girl’s

way of better offers." . . . But he *does* that, more often than not, with her first sight of him ! Never mind. He'd *rather* leave her fretting her heart out for life over the belief that he was only flirting after all, or let her make a miserable marriage with someone else—rather than be "dishonourable" enough to own up that he cares and wants her to wait perhaps three or four years for him. He's saved his precious "code," just as I suppose Sydney wished to save his.

Oh, men's "fine feelings," men's delicacy and tact, men's sense of honour ! What infinitely greater damage these do in the world than all women's lack of principle !

That sounds sweeping, but *isn't* this enough to make a girl storm at the scruples—or whatever they may call them—which have pretty well messed up her own life for her ?

I ought to be safely and happily married, by now, to Sydney Vandeleur. He'd make a charming husband, I know ; not a wish of his wife's that he wouldn't immediately try to gratify, from the pattern of the drawing-room carpets to where she would wish to live most of the time—Pont Street—Park Lane—or the perfectly gorgeous, old-fashioned castle with all modern conveniences that he owns in Ireland—Ballycool, they call it. Oh, for the deep sighing woods and the silver lakes over there—miles and miles from anywhere else—scented

solitude, with all the drawbacks of solitude removed by motors *ad lib.*—by big house-parties of amusing people as often as one chose!—Yes, I suppose I do share Miss Holt's type of mind, but then I never pretend to be romantic, or to cherish illusions about being able to fall in love. . . . I should be really, genuinely fond of Sydney himself—I mean I *should* have been. He'd be so devoted—how could one help feeling pleased to have him about, approving of everything one did and said and looked? He's what I'd call companionable; not too lofty and masculine to take an interest in the details that mean so much more to a woman than what this country is coming to, by Gad, or what on earth McKenna or Asquith or someone is driving at when he says—(here yards, droned aloud, out of the *Times*)—or whether Kent is going to do any better this year; which is all the conversation that any married women *I've* ever met seem to get out of *their* husbands. Sydney would always know what anyone had had on at a party, including his wife. He'd be able to help her think out her frocks—and what heavenly frocks they would be! Then he's so undeniably good-looking himself. One wouldn't be able to help appreciating the fact that the other women would always notice it with envy, and would put it down as such a score to the credit of the one he'd married! His dark,

“interesting” face with the Vandyke beard and the melancholy brown eyes seems watching me now out of the big silver frame in which he sent it to me. Yes ; it certainly does hold the place of honour on the narrow painted-pine chest-of-drawers that has two handles missing, but is still spread with ivory-topped brushes, a monogrammed hand-mirror and long crystal scent flagons—relics from the wreck of the Trant fortunes !—the place of honour usually reserved in a girl’s room for the portrait of HIM—whatever “he” may be ! Why did I put it there ? Partly for the sake of old times, I suppose ; I’ve tried to keep everything of that sort which was in my room at home. . . . Partly to remind myself, whenever I’ve felt extra-downhearted, that there was at least one eminently presentable young man who was accustomed to say pretty things of the face and hair that I saw reflected in the somewhat wavy looking-glass near by. . . . Sentiment, vanity, or a mixture of both, but *not* the motive with which Cicely had credited me and which she’d seen fit to impart to the original.

That idiot of a Sydney ! If I could hope he’d feel it, I’d smash the glass of that frame and run red-hot hatpins into his portrait. I have been furiously angry to-day, in turns with the three typists, with Still Waters, and with Cicely—but none of this counts, compared

with my fury against the lover who has come too late!

It's his fault. It's all his fault—all that's just happened—all that will happen during the mad "arrangement" of this next year. And when that year's up, where will it find me? A little richer, perhaps, by what's left of my desperately-won salary, but back in the over-crowded labour-market, the world of working-women who lose looks and youth and spirits in the struggle for daily bread. Oh, it's all very well to be plucky, and to treat everything as a joke, and to live from one Saturday matinée to another, making the most of life in London as a bachelor-girl—while you're twenty-one.

What becomes of the "bachelor-girl" of forty-five? And fifty?

That, I suppose, I shall have to wait and find out for myself, thanks to Mr. Sydney Vandeleur!

Why couldn't he have left things as they were at the Carlton?—

But I've had enough of this. It has "done me up" completely.

I am going to bed.

* * * * *

This morning I feel, if anything, angrier with Sydney Vandeleur than I did before.

He's done it now ! He *has* written.

His note lies before me on our wobbly little breakfast-table with the metal coffee-pot and the green Bruges crock full of lilac (bought out of my "rise" !) screening me from Cicely's anxious eyes as I read :

"*My dearest Monica,*

"*I have never called you so before. That was a mistake. Anything is a mistake that keeps us two apart. Dear, I want to come and see you at once, but cannot get out of some odious 'arrangements' of the Mamma's for this week-end.*

"*Let me come on Monday afternoon, and, though I don't deserve it, be kind to me then.*

"*Till then, and ever,*

"*Your devoted S. V.*"

Now *I* have written ; and pretty quickly too.

"*My dear Sydney,*

"*It was kind of you to write to me to congratulate me again on my engagement to Mr. Waters, which I suppose is the meaning of your note. You suggest calling ; is this to congratulate me for the third time ? If so, I can only hope that my happiness will*

keep pace with your good wishes for it ! But I am afraid that I shall not be able to receive them in person on Monday, as it is the very day that I hope to be going off to Sevenoaks, on a visit to my fiancé's mother.

"Please give my very kindest regards to Lady Vandeleur, and believe me

"Sincerely yours,

"Monica Trant."

There !

CHAPTER X

“ HIS ” MOTHER’S INVITATION

THE note of invitation from “ my *fiance’s* mother ” is purely formal and absolutely non-committal ; in fact, exactly the note I should have imagined that a Mrs. Waters would write.

I’ve got a perfectly clear mental image of this mother of an animated tape-machine. Handsome, in a regular-profiled, stately, mid-Victorian style, with steely grey eyes that “ cork-screw ” all the self-possession out of you, and—oh, the manner ! She won’t be openly disagreeable after all, I’ve decided. Worse ; she’ll be rigidly, frigidly polite ; clothing in irreproachable civilities the obvious wonder whether her son has taken leave of his senses, to propose to one of his own employees.

She writes that she looks forward (of course !) with pleasure (*dis*-pleasure, she means) to making my acquaintance (*will* she !) at The Lawn (well, I suppose they can’t *call* their house The Sarcophagus. But that’s what it ought to be. A glorified edition of the Governor’s private

office. Marble halls and chilly statuary—brr!) on Monday next. I expect she guesses that "this Miss Trant," or "that young woman," or "the horrid little typist-person," or whatever she calls me in her own mind, will be rather overwhelmed by the prospect; and no doubt Mrs. Waters means to see that I shall continue being overwhelmed—"kept in my place," indeed—during the whole of the fortnight that the Governor specified. But she can't realize the positive panic with which I anticipate the meeting. And, if I can steel myself to help it, she *shall not* realize it.

"I should think you can hardly wait until you get there, Tots," said Cicely, watching me pack new clothes in the new dress-basket bought specially for the dread occasion, for I've spent every minute of two days in shopping. "Aren't you *dying* to see what everything is going to be like?"

"I shall have to survive until to-morrow, anyhow."

"'His' home! His father's dead, you said. Is there only his mother?"

"I suppose so. Quite enough too. I think all engaged men ought to be orphans and only children before they begin, for the sake of the girl. 'Only' his mother, indeed!"

"Well, she's *bound* to be pleased with you, Tots! You're so pretty and ripping, especially

now you've got all these lovely new things. What a mercy that you had that little windfall of a legacy just in time to let you buy all fresh!"

(This is how I've been obliged to account for that.)

" You could go and stay anywhere now, meet anybody! He'll be so proud of you. It must be such a comfort for an engaged man when he knows that his people and his friends *can see what he means* when he shows off his *fiancée* to them for the first time, instead of their wondering what on earth he finds to admire!"

" Do you think Mrs. Waters will 'see what he means' by his getting himself engaged to his clerk?" I said, with a private giggle at my own bitterness. "I wish *I* did!"

" Now, Tots, don't fish for any more compliments. You know how people must admire you. Why, as Mr. Vandel—I mean, it's so obvious! Don't look so depressed, my dear. Of course I suppose going to meet 'his' people is always a fearful ordeal, but it ought to be less so for you than for most engaged girls!"

* * * * *

Perhaps—though Cicely doesn't know why—it *ought*!

Anyhow, these encouraging words of my chum's were still echoing in my ears as a late afternoon train bore me off from Victoria towards

Sevenoaks and that terrifying visit to my (official) mother-in-law elect. For the first time since the days when it was a matter of course for me to do so, I travelled first class. It wouldn’t do for me to alight at Sevenoaks station under the eyes of some pompous Waters domestic, all crumpled and dusty and warm from a compartment crowded with market-baskets and moist babies. I am taking this man’s money to pose as his *fiancée*, and it’s only fair to him that I should do him no discredit in any way.

So I travelled down in expensive seclusion, wearing for the first time one of my new costumes, a real success in thick tobacco-brown silk, with a duck of a little brown hat to match. Cicely chose that out of a big boxful “on approval” from Madame Chériquette’s.

Even without Cicely’s gratifying gush on the subject, I can’t help knowing that the smoky-cream underlining and the trimming—a cream-coloured feathery mount and a knot of dull-pink buds—are delightfully becoming to a clear brunette complexion and glossy black hair.

Thanks to my being an easy-to-fit small “stock size,” I’ve got a really charming little trousseau together at very short notice. As it’s probably the only trousseau of any sort that I shall ever possess now (I wonder what Sydney Vandeleur thought of my note?), I selected it with gusto, and I mean to enjoy the wearing of every stitch

of it, from the fur-lined motor-wrap to those American-pattern nighties that the girl in the shop said were "so sweetly bridal-looking, Moddam."

It's been such ages since I was able to choose and arrange a kit with garments for separate occasions and with a definite colour-scheme; it's so long I've been, not "dressed," but "covered"—yes! covered in patches with something in navy-blue that I've managed to afford at one time; something in brown that I've "had to have" at another time; something black that I've just "had by me."

But now I shall be able to look "together" once more in my favourite harmonies of soft browns, creams and pinks. A dream of mine on my way to the office has come true at last; it's a dream of a thick, clover-pink linen suit, with touches of heavy creamy lace in just the right places. In just the right places, too, it fits or falls away from me; and I don't think even the feminine edition of Still Waters will be able to help being *rather* impressed by it!

As for Sydney Vandeleur, I know *he* would have said—

* * * * *

I've been wondering whether after all I need have sent that curt note to Sydney? Of course, I *was* furious with him, first for coming too late, and secondly for proposing at all after I was powerless to accept him—he didn't know that; but what a position he put me into!

Could I have put an end to it? (My thoughts raced on with the train.)

Could I have written that very evening to Mr. Waters, cancelling that preposterous arrangement with him, returning that lump sum of salary, and saying—

Impossible! A hundred pounds of that salary had had to go, irrevocably, as soon as I got it. And already I’d broken into that remaining four hundred in the bank! I couldn’t make up even that.

How would it have been if when Sydney proposed to me, I had replied:

“I can’t see you. I can’t even tell you anything more, yet. But wait a year, and then ask me again”?

Since he’s “waited” so long——!

But no.

That wouldn’t have done either. It wouldn’t be keeping my bargain. It would be “giving away” my compact with that other, that detestable man, who trusts after all to my word—and after all, Sydney *has* got himself to thank for the fact that I haven’t been choosing a trousseau to please *him*. . . .

Well! There’s nothing in *this* outfit, I hope, that won’t pass the censorship of the most critical glances in any big house—those of the

servants. Men-servants, I suspect, are almost harder to "impress" than maid-servants.

But it was no lordly groom or supercilious chauffeur who met me at Sevenoaks Station as I stepped out of the train.

The tall, broad-shouldered figure that strode towards me looked, in a big, grey, loose motor-coat, so utterly different from the mind-picture of the slimly-built, dark, Vandyke-bearded young man that had travelled most of the way down with me, so different, too, from the other apparition I know only too well in immaculate "City" get-up, that at first I didn't recognize him.

Then a cap was lifted. I saw the fair hair, brushed sleek as satin, and the keen, blonde face of my employer.

Several people on the platform were glancing at him as if he were almost as well known down here in the country as in Leadenhall Street.

Then eagerly inquisitive glances were turned to me. I caught a whisper of "Mr. William Waters' young lady!" I wondered if the speaker—a prosperous-looking sort of butcher—expected to overhear some tender greeting? How "sold" he'd have been!

"Ah, there you are, Miss Trant!"—briskly as ever. "Good afternoon. What luggage have you? Porter, bring these things across to the car. I'm motoring you up to the house myself," added Mr. Waters to me, as we left the

station, “ because there’s a little supplementary detail I wanted to ‘ put you on to,’ so to speak, before you meet my people.”

“ Oh, yes ? ” I said inquiringly, and I mentally reached for my pencil and pad.

But as I sat beside him on the comfortably padded seat with a lovely rug drawn up over my knees, and with a thick glass screen keeping my *chic* little new hat from getting blown about, I felt the pad-and-pencil side of my life slipping away from me as swiftly and steadily as the green hawthorn hedges that lined the road seemed slipping past this gliding car.

I had had a brute of a time just lately—now came the reaction. I suppose it was partly the entirely feminine sensation, thrilling every scrap of my body, that it was once more decently dressed ! Partly, too, it was the influence of skimming over a country road again, breathing in untainted breezes under a blue sky with rolling white cauliflower clouds ; having a whole smiling landscape to myself again !—for the moment I lost count of *how* this had happened. The thoughts of the last hour were left behind with those of the last two years—with the mean streets and the City smells and noises, and those Battersea rooms, and that utter lack of space and privacy, and that crushing sense of being just one unit out of millions that didn’t matter !

Before I'd experienced these things, I'd lived for nineteen years, another sort of life ; and this seemed almost like coming home to it. I felt as if I were the fish that, having been left stranded on the proverbial gravel path, has somehow succeeded in flopping back to his native element.

I gave myself up to the luxury of the feeling—to the exhilarating rush through the clear air.

And I'd practically forgotten who was driving me, when his business-like voice sounded once more in my ear.

"Miss Trant ! Your Christian name, as I saw by your note to my mother, is Monica ? "

"Yes."

I supposed he was now going to ask me if I had any objection to his addressing me thus as long as I was his mother's guest. Why, of course, he'd *have* to ! Just as I should have to bring myself to use his own name of "William." ("Ahem ! Wil-liam !" as Miss Robinson pronounced it pompously.) How queer to have to be asked to accord one's Christian name under such terms ! Really, he might have taken it as a matter of course that he must, for the next fortnight or so, call me "Monica." Therefore I was rather taken aback by his next remark.

"I shall have to ask you if you would mind very much, while you are staying at The Lawn, being called 'Nancy' ? "

"Nancy !" I echoed, opening my eyes. "Oh,

yes—no—I mean—anything you like; but why *Nancy*?"

Mr. Waters turned to me for a moment as the car sped smoothly down a level, empty stretch of the white highway.

"I'd better explain to you 'why Nancy,'" he said dryly. In those keen grey eyes of his, where some time before I had suspected a gleam of humour, I now saw a quite unmistakable twinkle of fun!

There was even a twitch at the corner of those tightly-fitted lips. But he went on still more dryly. "When I informed my mother that I was engaged to be married to a lady in the office, she had a good many questions to put."

(Well, I should think so! The Longer Catechism, in fact!) "Really?" I said meekly.

"And almost the first thing she asked me was what her Christian name was."

(M'm, "almost"—I wonder what the *very first* thing was? What is it generally?)

"Of course, I ought to have foreseen that——"

(And *hadn't* he? Good gracious! The mapped-out scheme with *another* flaw in it!)

—"but curiously enough, I'd overlooked it, and wasn't prepared for it. Now, I couldn't very well tell my mother the truth, namely, that I did not know. I have never been able to make out whether your usual initials were 'M' or 'N. T.' I had taken it for 'N.' So, on

the spur of the moment, I gave her the first girl's name that began with N that I could think of."

N or M! Yes! *Exactly* like the catechism!

For the first time in my life in Still Waters' presence I laughed aloud. Surely the country air and the rush through it in the car must have gone to my head. Amazed at myself, but even then laughing a little still, I pulled myself together to inquire, "And what did you say to Mrs. Waters when she received my note signed by my real name?"

"Oh!—I said—something or other about 'Nancy' being the usual abbreviation for 'Monica' in some places!"

"How *quick* of you!" I retorted—while my Near Oriental self sat back and gasped at my new boldness. He *must* have wondered at it too; thought it bravado, the recklessness of despair, I suppose.

"*Something* had to be said! And I am afraid, Miss Trant, that, for the matter in hand, 'Nancy' it will have to be. A sort of *nom-de-guerre*, you know—if you can call it '*guerre*.'"

He was actually laughing himself now. This made his face look at least ten years younger, changing him so that I felt him to be even more of a stranger to me than the machine-like autocrat who rapped out his "*Now, Miss Trant!*" and his "*Take this down*" at the Near Oriental. But in a moment he was serious again. He

seemed, for the first time, to feel something of what *I've* been feeling ever since we've been—so to speak, "engaged."

"It's asking a good deal, but I have to trust to you to meet all these awkwardnesses as well as you can," he said gravely. "And I'll do all in my power to avoid them, I assure you. A good deal of the strangeness can be put down to the—er—natural shyness of people who are—so—er—recently engaged."

"Oh, of course," I murmured, struggling not to laugh any more.

But I wondered what other wild fictions about "*Nancy*" he'd had to improvise for his mother. Supposing she'd wanted to know what I was like to *look* at? Well, *he* wouldn't know! Dark or fair—short or tall? As likely as not he'd tell her—as *something* had to be said—that I was six foot high and a radiant blonde. And what would she think of his not possessing a single photograph of me to show her? Really, he was almost benighted enough, since he'd given me another girl's name, to pass off as mine another girl's portrait!

Even as I was laughing to myself again, the car turned in at a stone-pillared entrance, and its plumply-tyred wheels purred on a perfectly-gravelled drive between tall laurel-hedges.

Oh! we were nearly there, then. I didn't want to laugh any more. Now for it. . . .

CHAPTER XI

MEETING “ HIS ” PEOPLE

WE skirted what seemed like an ocean of green velvet turf. We swept round another corner.

“ There’s the house,” announced Mr. Waters.

“ *That——?* ”

It was long and low and white and homely—yes! *homely*-looking—overgrown with purple wistaria, and swept at one end by a fountain of gold from an immense laburnum-tree. A deep, shady verandah was flung like a protecting arm about the waist of the house.

The late sunlight flashed on a scurry of something all goldeny-white, as there rushed out of the shade of this verandah what looked like a mix-up of several dogs and flying skirts. . . .

“ *Girls?* ” I thought, as two slender, white-clad figures came towards me. “ Who are *these?* ”

“ My sisters, Theodora and Blanche,” said the Governor quickly to me. “ *Down, Cariad!* *Down, sir,* ” to the little dog—there was only one of him, it appeared, when he stopped frisking

for a moment about the man who was helping me to alight.

The taller of the two girls came forward first, murmured timidly, "So glad you've come!" held out both hands with an awkward, diffident little smile that was quite charming, and bent very shyly to kiss me. She was about eighteen, with fair hair, and features very cleanly-cut and something like her brother's.

"I am Blanche," she murmured. "This is Theo."

"Theo," seemed to be about fifteen. My first impression of her showed me a pair of long coltish legs and a round cowslip-bell of a head, covered with short yellow curls. She said nothing, but she *looked*, looked at me out of a pair of the largest and brightest brown eyes that I had ever met; they seemed almost the size of the goggles in a diver's helmet, and I felt them following me devouringly as I was led into the hall.

"Here is Nancy, Mother," called Mr. Waters.

Another figure came forward to meet me. This—his mother? A startling contrast indeed to what I'd pictured her. She was dressed in the soft, lacy, unshaped black that best suits an elderly lady; and her soft, puffed-out hair was grey all over. But that was as far as the "elderliness" of the Governor's mother went. Her figure was as tall and seemed nearly as slender as

Blanche's ; she had the long-armed, free movements that I've heard my father praise in Miss Ellen Terry ; her face was pink and irregular-featured and mobile, her expression shy and smiling. She seemed like some girl who had fallen into a trance in the "Eighties," from which she had just woken up to find that her hair was no longer brown, and that the world, which puzzled her a little, had gone on without her. Her voice was soft and hesitating, and full of unexpected half-tones.

"Oh, have you come ? Nancy ! You are so welcome, my dear ! I called you 'Miss Trant' in my note, because I thought it was the right thing when I hadn't ever seen you. But I needn't go on being so stiff, need I ? Billy said he thought I needn't."

The Governor had disappeared towards the car again.

"Your boxes have gone upstairs, dear, and you might like to rest before it's time to get ready for dinner. *Blanche* will take you to your room," added Mrs. Waters, holding back Theo, whose yellow head and whose long legs seemed just about to precipitate themselves after me—for that child to enjoy another good look, no doubt. "No, Cariad, you can't go either ! Come, Missis's little dog"—the long white body was frolicking about just ahead of me. "He *knows* he never enters the house!"

And I knew the pet dogs who are supposed to cherish these rules. Cariad flung himself gleefully in front of the diffident, fair-haired Blanche as she escorted me upstairs.

We were on the landing when the sound of a voice that I hadn't heard before, clear as a bell and distinct as a choir-boy's solo, rang up to us from below.

"No won-der, Mother! Mother, I say, no won-der! Is-n't she pretty? Billy never *told* us! He never—."

Here an abrupt full-stop.

"Oh, I do hope you won't mind Theo; she is rather awful sometimes," murmured Blanche Waters, as apologetically scarlet as if she had done something to offend me. "She will say things—and so *loud*! It's *only* because she's so pleased—and she's only thirteen really—it's awful being so tall. People always expect you to be so much more sensible, somehow! This is your room." She opened a white door. "Outside, Cariad! (He *knows* he never comes upstairs.) Do let me unpack for you, Nancy."

"Oh! Thank you so much, but—"

I felt I must, *must* be left to myself for the present. At the risk of seeming ungracious, I added hastily, "I can manage, really!"

Even though I'm *not* fated to be a sister-in-law, I should like this nice girl to like me. So I smiled up at her, and she put out a long, rather

bony young finger, and just touched my coat-collar. I realized that I needn't have "fussed" so over my "trousseau."

"Ah! I daresay you're tired, too."

"I am, rather." (Strictly speaking, I am ready to drop, though not entirely with fatigue.)

"Then I'll send up some hot water presently, Nancy. (*Come, Cariad!*)"

And she left me to what I felt I must have or perish—the solitude of my own room, leisure to gasp over the series of additional shocks I had just received.

* * * * *

First and foremost, though it seems a funny detail to push itself in front of all the other things, there's "*Billy!*"

To think that Still Waters should be "*Billy*" to anyone—even if it's only to his mother!

After Miss Holt's "Do you ever call him *Billy*, by any chance?" and my solemn "Never!" to realize that the man who Miss Robinson vowed "could never have been anything so human as a little boy" does actually possess that characteristically little-boyish pet-name! And I suppose I shall be expected to call him that while I'm here? My goodness! "*William*" I was prepared for. "*William*," with its touch of stiffness—and—stateliness, I might manage. But— Still, if I must, I must. In for a

penny, in for a pound. (Only in this case it's meant being in for five hundred pounds !)

And then that he should have that unexpected, that utterly uncharacteristic, that un-Waters-like sort of mother ! Welcoming me like that ! All I can say is that he—the Governor—*must* take after his father exactly !

And the house ! Not in the least like a sarcophagus—or even the corner of the British Museum with Near Oriental fittings, as *I'd* pictured it !

Looking round this bedroom they've put me into, I see it's exactly the sort that I've always loved, particularly since my lot has been cast in that poky little egg-box of a Battersea flat, with one skimpy strip of bedroom window giving on a view of grimy-grey back-yard, a kennel made out of a packing-case, and lines of washing hanging out to dry.

Here, at The Lawn, my quarters do seem so palatially big and airy ! There's *miles* of wardrobe space for my new things, I see. And *what* a lovely long mirror ! That delicious scent of lavender and pot-pourri comes from the big china bowl on the window-ledge. There's a wide bay of casement-windows looking out on to that wonderful lawn, sprays of feathery mauve wistaria tap against the panes outside. Inside, rose-peonies and giant tulips riot over the cream-and-red-and-pink-patterned chintzes of hangings

and upholstery. The wallpaper is sprinkled with bouquets of rosebuds caught up with ribbons ; and the bed-spread is of glowing rose-colour. No trace anywhere of those “Art-muds” and sad sage-greens that even well-off people get into their rooms so often now. Why can’t they realize that greens, to be successful, must be kept out of doors ? Green as an indoor background, *no !* I’d have chosen just these gay, dainty patterns and colours for my bedroom, if—

But *what’s* the use of thinking over the house I might have had ? I’m not going to. I ought to be breathlessly thankful that this one where I have to spend a fortnight is turning out to be so much more congenial than I’d hoped, and that “his” people are quite unlike “him !”

How suddenly “right” my dear old silver-and-crystal toilette things look against the setting of the Sheraton dressing-table with the plate-glass top ! To think that one dismal wet day I nearly packed them all up and sent them off by Mrs. Skinner to be “put away,” and the price thereof turned into new boots ! “Boots a poor typist must have,” I argued. “Silver-topped bottles and luxuries of that sort she doesn’t need any more.” How frightfully glad I am, now, that I hadn’t the heart to do it after all, that I sent my shoes to be re-soled instead—and that all my own monogrammed brushes are mirrored

in the oval glass beside that lustre jar of rich, mahogany-coloured wallflowers that, next to my own dark head and its moving reflections, seem to give the deepest touch of colour in the room. I suppose the girls put those there—Yes! That's another shock. The *sisters*! That *he* should have sisters like—

A tap at the door.

"Come in!"

Enter, explosively, the excited little white dog, followed by a large and shiny copper can, and the eyes—they seem to dominate everything else about that child!—of Theodora.

"Brought you some hot water"—in a meek and muffled voice. "Dinner is—(Put those down, Cariad! He *knows* people's slippers aren't for him to eat!) Dinner is at eight. *I'm* not supposed to come down."

Here the huge brown eyes turned ruefully for a moment from me to the gleaming sheath of the new frock that I'd just thrown over the brass rail of the bed. I guessed the thought behind them. They longed for another satisfying stare at it—*on* me.

Why shouldn't I have this child fond of me?

"Shall I say good-night now, then, Theo?" I suggested. "Or—if you tell me which your room is, shall I come in after I'm dressed?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Theo, bell-mouthing. "Gem!" Then, carefully muffling the voice

again, "That's the schoolroom door opposite—between the corridor window and the picture of 'Delia in Arcady.' Thanks *awf'ly*, Nancy. (*Come along, Cariad!*)"

Not every engaged girl has such a walk-over with "his" people! But I think Theo would approve of me as a sister-in-law, if she were going to have the chance! I shouldn't mind *her*! . . . On second thoughts, I don't know whether I am so pleased after all that these people are so kind and welcoming and different from what I had expected.

Wouldn't it be almost easier for me in some ways if his mother and his sisters *were* the "collection of frosty-faces" (as Miss Robinson expresses it) whom I'd anticipated meeting? I was prepared; I could have coped with *them*. Why has he got sisters like these—just the kind of girls I could imagine sisters of *mine*?

Why *must* his mother be so sweet to me, without a gleam of the "designing-little-minx-of-a-typist" look in her eyes, without—I verily believe—a thought of it in her heart? Ready to take to her arms the stranger within her gates whom she looks upon as her son's lady-love—oh, it's too embarrassing!

For the first time since this sham engagement was arranged between my employer and myself, I feel what I did not feel when I confronted my fellow-typists, the Vandeleurs or Cicely

with the news that I was Mr. Waters' *fiancée*; what I did not feel when I first slipped these lying diamonds on to my finger; what I didn't feel when I cabled that money to Jack, or even when I wrote to Sydney.

I feel—there is no other word to express it—downright *mean*!

How am I going to stand a whole fortnight of it? How *am* I to keep up this incessant pose and pretence under the gentle, unsuspecting eyes of Mrs. Waters?

I believe I could have calmly invented fib after fib for the benefit of Lady Vandeleur—

Now, now! Thoughts beginning with "Vandeleur" have got to be sternly suppressed unless I mean to give myself a fit of the blues and make some terrible *faux pas* presently, at dinner, in the bosom of the Governor's family.

So come, Monica Trant, my child—"Nancy," I mean, of course, *Nancy*! (How I hope I shall remember to answer to that name when I hear it, instead of forgetting who they mean and imagining it's the little white dog!) You pull yourself together, Nancy, and dive into the pretty new evening-frock—it will be gorgeous to have proper lights and a real glass to dress by once again!—then go and show it off to that avid-eyed child in the schoolroom. And then downstairs with you, to earn some more of your five hundred pounds!

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST DINNER

WELL! the first evening is over.

It hasn't been nearly as bad as it might, though it certainly has produced several more quite unexpected developments.

We dined ; for the first time for well over a year I sat down at a luxuriously-appointed round dinner-table with all its conventional daintiness of perfect napery, silver and glass—instead of the picnic-supper affair, with every single plate and fork an “oddment,” cast by the hands of Mrs. Skinner upon the rickety table at Marconi Mansions. Instead of gossiping with Cicely Harradine clad in the faded green Japanese kimono that she finds “such a rest to slop into” after all the fashionable dressing-up at Chéri-sette’s—for Cicely is rather the type of girl whom work demoralizes instead of bracing—I was of a party of two other women and a man in evening-dress.

That dinner-jacket does make the Governor look so much younger—it's positively laughable !

For another thing, it seems to take him right out of his isolated Near Oriental niche, and to put him in the same rank of human beings as men who used to dine at our house when my father was alive. Positively, I have begun to look upon my once-dreaded employer as quite an ordinary—though certainly *not* a likable—sort of young man! Never again need *he* expect to keep up, with me, the attitude of a metallic species of Business-deity who disappears after business-hours to some vague, chilly and unknown Olympus, of which no glimpse would ever be vouchsafed to any of us, his grovelling subordinates. Oh, no!

Not now that I've seen his people, the pretty things out of which his mother has made such a nest of a home for him; not after making the acquaintance of Blanche and of that gift of God, Theodora, and of Cariad. That little outdoor dog spent the whole of dinner-time cosily curled up under the table on his "Missis's" black satin skirt, and not all the flappings of the Governor's table-napkin or his curtest "Here! Out of that, Cariad! Outside, sir!" had the slightest effect in dislodging him. I would have given at least five of my as yet unearned five hundred pounds for Miss Robinson to have been granted the sight of Still Waters cheerfully defied by that small Sealyham! I can see her "potting" the scene, with Miss Holt's white

feather neck-ruffle commandeered to represent the little dog who “*knows* that skirts aren’t there for him to sit upon!” And *I’m* not “there to be sat upon” any more, either! I’m beginning to wonder how the Governor managed to “take me in” for so long! Why, he is a regular *fraud*! And a fraud found out is never terrifying—even if it’s exasperating.

If anyone is going to be alarmed now, it’s not his official *fiancée*, but he himself; for he was—yes, positively!—nervous and embarrassed at dinner. If that had been the first time I’d met him I should have thought that the big and blonde and silent young man opposite was *deadly shy of me!* Of *me*; after all that he had handed out to me in the way of orders and commands and arrangements during the past fortnight. It is a good thing if, as he says, a good deal of the “strangeness” will be put down to the “natural awkwardness of people so recently engaged”—but it’s a still better thing that I contrived to be rather less “awkward” and speechless than *he* was! To myself I seemed to be sitting a little apart, watching another Mon—Nancy, I mean—smiling and chatting gaily with his mother and the younger girls.

What dears they are! and how one sees their feminine touch in everything about the room, from the arrangement of the many and becoming lights, to the graceful massing of sulphur-coloured

pansies and gypsophila in the centre of the round table !

At dinner it was chiefly, I think, of flowers that we talked—such a nice, safe subject. It seems that the Governor is actually interested in gardening. *How* amazed the staff would be if it were hinted that Still Waters took the vaguest gleam of interest in anything outside making money for the firm !

After dinner, when he remained behind in the dining-room to smoke, his mother slipped one white hand into Blanche's arm, the other into mine ; and the gesture, I know, was meant to imply that she had “ another daughter now.”

We stepped together across the black-and-white-tiled hall into the drawing-room, with its ordered chaos of pretty, old-fashioned furniture and dainty new things, and the unmistakable atmosphere of a homey room that is lived in.

Mrs. Waters drew me down beside her on the wide, shallow sofa, and I saw her eyes dwelling on every line of my face, as if she were trying to learn fresh knowledge of her son from the girl who presumably was permitted to see him as his own mother never sees a man.

That brought a lump into my throat. I bent my head over my work—a bit of Richelieu embroidery with which I had taken care to provide myself. I had remembered some axioms of Miss Robinson at the office :

"Never you be without a bit of fancy-work, girls, when you wish to impress. Men seem to think a girl must be so sweet and womanly who can sit for hours wagging a crochet-hook and a bit of thread at them. As for the future mother-in-law, she always imagines a girl is more likely to turn out domesticated if she cannot keep her hands still for ten minutes. Besides, a bit of drawn-thread work, or whatever it is, gives you something to look at when you don't exactly know what to say next."

The last reason was mine. I certainly did not know what to say when the Governor's mother remarked softly :

"You know, Nancy, you are just what I hoped you would be."

"Am I ? "

I felt an unutterable little *cad*.

Yes, Mr. William Waters ! And who forced me into the position of feeling like this ?

"So pretty and gentle and quiet, and yet you 'see' things with those brown eyes of yours," pronounced Mrs. Waters. "At first I feared it was impossible that any girl who had only met my boy just in business-hours, and wearing that office-mask he has to put on, could grow to care for him as we do ; but I see you could understand. You guessed that all that brusqueness and peremptory manner were just the armour for his sensitiveness ; you would see that he has

to put on that manner to hide the awful truth that at the bottom of his heart he is naturally as shy and nervous as Blanche and I are. *I believe,*" she laughed softly, "that that's why he *never* allows us to call at the office while we're in town! The staff *might* suspect, seeing *us*, that he *has* another sort of manner than the terrible one he speaks through the telephone with! I dare say that even you were taken in by it at first, weren't you? Until he began to reveal his real self to you, I expect you looked upon him merely as a business-machine, didn't you, Nancy?"

"I suppose I did," I murmured, feeling more uncomfortable at every word uttered by this dear, innocent lady, who had created such an idealized version of her son's character.

"And when did you begin to find out the real Billy?"

Here was a nice question! Thank goodness I was spared the answering of it!

At that moment the drawing-room door opened to admit the tallest of the admirable parlourmaids, with the tray bearing a silver coffee-machine and the dainty Dresden service.

Blanche rose from the cushion where she had been sitting at my feet, and went to the table to officiate. In her simple white dinner-gown she looked like a tall lily bending down.

"Mother, plenty of hot milk and a little

sugar? Nancy, how do you like your coffee?"

"I don't take it, thank you very much."

"Oh, then here's Billy's—black, with plenty of sugar. Will he be coming in for it?"

Her mother gave a little smile.

"I think perhaps Nancy won't mind taking in Billy's coffee to him. Will you, dear? He's in his 'den'; the door just opposite, across the hall."

Even without her gently mischievous glance I should have realized what she meant. The unsuspecting, sympathetic creature thought she was being kind and tactful, making an opportunity for me to have a little time alone with my *fiancé*.

She imagined that we were longing for a lovers' *tête-à-tête*, with all the fond, foolish talk that one could guess at—beaming smiles at each other, like Smithie's—Ordinary love-making! Yes, of course, people will have to be allowed to think that there's that between us, too. I hadn't wasted many thoughts on this aspect of the case. But this "rubbed it in."

I felt a wave of scorching scarlet rush up my face to the roots of my hair. However, that didn't matter: no doubt Mrs. Waters put it down to the "natural shyness" of a girl in love. She never guessed the *furious* mixture of feelings that sent that blush into my cheeks.

I kept my head up and my voice quite steady as I replied : " Oh, certainly ! "

And I rose, taking up the green-garlanded cup with the small gilt apostle-spoon in the saucer, and left the drawing-room to face my first official *tête-à-tête* with the Governor.

Ever since he's been the unconscious cause of my having had to give up the chance of a serene and happy future with the man who really cares for me, I've looked upon my employer with a mixture of resentment and dread. As I say, the dread's melted rapidly. But the resentment's growing !

" I'll make him pay, somehow," thought I revengefully, " for all this ! " By " all this " I meant not only for the loss of Sydney, and the castle at Ballycool, and comfort and position, but for making me look and feel so acutely foolish before Mrs. Waters.

" I'll see if I can't make him rather uncomfortable over it himself," I determined.

I crossed the hall, forcing myself to feel as if I were back in the office, where we typists took it in turn to carry Mr. Dundonald's cup of afternoon tea into the inner sanctum, where he glowered over his figures.

(How cross he was if one of us shook the cup so that some of the tea slopped over and soaked the lump of sugar and the biscuit laid in the saucer.)

Gingerly I carried the dainty cup of black coffee across to the door of the "den."

There, deliberately, I tapped twice.

The sound of my knock on the door reminded me of another occasion—on which I'd presented myself alone before the Governor, that afternoon at the Near Oriental ; that first interview in his office.

This *tête-à-tête*—the first in his own home—was going to be very different !

CHAPTER XIII

THE FIRST TÊTE-À-TÊTE

A RATHER surprised voice called "Come in!"

In I went—to find the Governor smoking a cigarette and sitting on the wide red-leather-padded club-fender of a room that was in complete contrast to the feminine domain I had left. Almost empty, but for its tall book-shelves, a grandfather's clock, a couple of solid, "man-ny-looking" arm-chairs and a grand piano.

I dropped my voice into its meekest Near Oriental tone as I announced :

"Your coffee, Mr. Waters!"

It was exactly the tone in which I'd so often said, "Your tea, Mr. Dundonald!" and yet I knew that the man before me would guess that this deference was, under the circumstances, only a subtle form of defiance.

I handed him the cup. Then I stood there, outwardly as mild as milk, before him. One swift glance into the mirror over the mantelpiece beyond his broad shoulder—his shoulders

are the best thing about him—had shown me an attractive picture enough—a big, blonde man faced by a *petite*, graceful girl, with her night-black hair swathed in a silky garland round her head, and her white shoulders and neck emerging from an admirably-cut dinner-gown of creamy charmeuse and chiffon patterned by rose-pink beadwork, whose colour echoed the soft flush in her cheeks.

Just before dinner, Theo, in the schoolroom, with all her eyes and half the voice-power at her command, had told me the dress was *divine*, and that I looked a little *angel* in it!

“Angel?” H’m. That wasn’t how I *felt*, exactly. Still I know I looked my best; as pretty as ever I’d looked in the dear old days before I had anything else to do.

Looking her best always keys a girl up to doing her best.

(Or her worst, as the case may be.)

Besides, another glance at the Governor had shown me that I’d been right in my suspicion at dinner. He *was* embarrassed. He was—probably for the first time in his life—*shy*!

This put the finishing touch to my feeling myself to be—also for the first time—mistress of this situation.

Therefore, I stood there, still waiting, looking as if it were I who were paralysed with shyness, deliberately waiting for *him* to speak.

"Thank you," he had murmured as he took the cup from me. There was another pause, which was—as I fully intended—the first of many. Then he added, in a rather uncertain sort of voice, "I suppose it was my mother's—my mother who sent you in here?"

"Yes! Oh, yes," I said hastily, as if breathlessly flurried and meek beyond all words. "She seemed to think—I didn't know what else to do—am I in your way?" (Here I glanced up at him with scared, appealing eyes as much as to say, "Is it my fault if I am?")

Pause.

"I am afraid," said the Governor, rather as if the words were forced from him, "that I shall have to ask you to put up this—er—incongruity for the next half-hour or so. Won't you sit down, Miss Trant?" And he wheeled forward one of those capacious arm-chairs, placing it at a mercifully wide distance from the fender-stool—where Mrs. Waters perhaps imagined we were at that moment sitting—Oh shade of everything that's wildly impossible!—sitting together like ordinary young engaged people, hand in hand—or however they *do* sit. My goodness!

I sat down, dropping my eyes demurely, and folding my hands in my lap.

Another pause.

"I—er—" said the Governor, then stopped

and tried to look as if he hadn't begun a sentence.

"Yes? Is there anything that I can—that you think I ought to be able to do for you while I am here, Mr. Waters?"

"Perhaps it might be wiser if you stopped calling me by that name"—dryly. He seemed to have pulled himself together with a jerk, for he was looking and speaking more like himself at this. However, it had no effect on *me*.

"Oh, of *course*," I said obediently, "I shall *always* remember to call you B—— by your Christian name (*that* is an abbreviation, too, isn't it?) when we are with the others."

"And then, if you use my other name when we are alone, you may forget, and let it slip out when the others are here," he objected, looking down on me from his perch on the fender-stool, "and—and it's more than likely that my sisters might notice. Theodora notices everything."

"Yes"—gently—"so I gather."

"And always says out what she thinks," her brother informed me. "That's why—if you don't mind—I am going to continue calling you 'Nancy' even when we are alone."

"Oh, certainly," I said softly. "And I suppose I must practise trying not to feel afraid of you."

He looked sharply at me, but I know there was no expression in my face, and my eyes seemed

fixed upon the hands in my lap, upon the ring I was turning, idly, round my engagement-finger.

"Afraid of me?" he took up. "You?"

"Oh, Mr. Waters—I *beg* your pardon, I didn't mean to use that name again. I was going to say, you know that we are all terrified to death of you—at the office."

I know he guessed that I meant "*but this is not the office, and I've lost all the wholesome awe that I still had of you only yesterday, and I'm no more terrified of you than Cariad is, now!*" Without looking directly at him, I saw his keen, blonde face flush a little under its tan—this City-fied young man is oddly sunburnt—and his firmly-fitted lips moved as if he were going to say something but thought better of it. After a pause he opened them again and asked :

"Do you smoke—er—Nancy?"

"No, thanks very much," I said primly.

Silence fell.

The Governor cleared his throat.

I knew he literally couldn't think what to say next, and I exulted inwardly. I felt as if I really were getting a little of my own back now—not only for the awkwardness and unpleasantness due to the "engagement," but for everything I've loathed while I've been at the Near Oriental—the dreary journey there morning after morning, the monotony, the

irksomeness, the daily looming terror of “the sack,” the hated hoverings round me of Mr. Dundonald and his “*talk-ing!*”

Oh, how my employer was longing for me to “talk” at *that* moment! to say something—anything!

But I wouldn’t. I think I could have let that lagging silence last for quite another five minutes as far as I was concerned, only I was afraid I might break into wild laughter unless I spoke. So I gave it up, and suggested gravely and helpfully:

“I *have* got some fancy-work with me, but I left it in the drawing-room. Shall I go back and fetch it? Or—wouldn’t that quite *do*? ”

“Afraid not,” said the Governor grimly.

“It seems so stupid to sit here doing nothing; for you, too,” I added sympathetically. “If you have brought any letters down here from the office, you might, perhaps, care to dictate them to me——”

“Thank you, no,” said Mr. Waters firmly. “I seldom do any business out of business-hours.”

I turned my ring again ostentatiously. I hope he knew I was pointing out to him how *my* “business” had to go on all day long—the woman’s work, in fact, being never done!

My next mild suggestion was, “Do you play picquet?”

“Don’t know one card from another.”

I sighed, as if with mingled regret and boredom.

It was a very insincere sigh ! for, to begin with, I loathe any form of card-playing myself ; I don't believe the story that cards were invented to please a mad king ; I believe he was *driven* mad by the card-games of the period ! Secondly, I wasn't one bit bored. I was revelling in the spectacle of this wretched young man—imagine being able to employ such a phrase to the Grand Panjandrum himself !—this *wretched* young man looking so acutely uncomfortable and at such a loss.

Gleefully I allowed yet another long and awkward pause to take place.

Then I put my hand—the left one—up to my mouth as if to stifle a yawn. Then I glanced at the ship in full sail that rocked to and fro on the face of the grandfather's clock, and murmured resignedly : “ Only twenty minutes past nine ? ”

“ I am afraid that clock is always kept ten minutes fast,” said my host.

I sighed again, more deeply.

Then I allowed my eyes to wander—as if vainly seeking the way of escape!—round the comfortable, masculine-looking room. Actually, my glance was caught by an odd-looking arrangement of wires across the ceiling.

“ Oh, what are those for ? ” I asked. “ Telegraphy ? ”

"No; I had those put there to improve the acoustics of this room. It was otherwise so bad to play and sing in."

"Oh!" I said, and wondering why Blanche didn't use the drawing-room to sing in, I glanced at the sombre shape of the piano at the other end of the den.

"I wonder if you would allow me to practise in here sometimes—of course, only in the mornings?" I requested meekly. "When I go back to London, I shall want to see about a situation as music-teacher or something of that kind. I must have some definite work to do—besides yours, I mean!—and I ought to furbish up my playing."

"Ah, you play, do you?" said Mr. Waters, in a tone of the deepest relief. "Good!"

He got up, switched on some more lights, and opened the piano.

"I wonder if you have a rarer accomplishment still. Can you accompany?"

"I ought to be able to," said I, with a little bitter smile to myself.

For I've certainly spent hours enough at the piano with Sydney Vandeleur, practising or transposing his lyrics. He has a gift for pretty, tender melody-writing; he "sets" all his favourite verses. . . .

"Will you try over a song with me, then?"

(What! It was *he* who sang?)

“Certainly !”

This was not my subdued, Leadenhall Street office “Certainly.” It was the way in which I might have spoken to Sydney, or to Major Montresor, or the Somervilles, or any of the men who came to my father’s house in the old days, and for whom I played in the evening.

“Wait a minute. This gets in the way ; clicks on the keys,” said I, glancing at those weighty diamonds that blazed on my finger. And I drew off his ring, pushing it with a careless little flick out of my way on the glassy black top of the piano. He had put up before me Schubert’s “*Still wie die Nacht.*”

Appropriate enough, for Still Waters ! “ Still as the night, deep as the sea——”

I took up the first chords.

Then came surprise again.

I had expected him to possess a big, bull-dog bass, full of sound and fury, and without a touch of feeling in it. To my amazement, his voice turned out to be a particularly sweet, true tenor. Shut your eyes, and you could imagine that it was the most sympathetic and delightful of men who was singing, instead of *the Governor* !

Can there be many more surprises about this man ? However, I flatter myself that I’ve given him several. The crushed-looking, deferential typist in the ready-made delaine blouse, and with the carbon-stained fingers, that shook with

nervousness when he rattled off his far-too-quick dictation to them, was a distinct contrast to this dainty, well-dressed young woman, who lays her own plans for him to see that she is laughing at him in her sleeve.

And it's his turn to use deference to me.

"Thank you, so much—er—Nancy." This last word brought out with a jerk of resolution. "It's a treat to be accompanied by someone who can do it so unusually well ; it's like waltzing with a partner whose step just suits one's own."

Good gracious ! Where and when has this man learned to dance ?

But he *can* sing. I quite enjoyed playing for it. I think we went through quite half a dozen songs—"Widdicombe Fair" was one of them—before I remembered that this wasn't the form I meant *my* enjoyment to take.

So, when he put up yet another—"Drake's Drum" this time—and said, "Shall we try this ?" I relapsed into my wickedly mild manner once more, and replied hesitatingly : "Don't you think that would be enough—for Mrs. Waters ? I mean, that she would consider I had stayed the right length of time ? May—mayn't I get down, now ? "

"Oh ! Sorry if I have tired you," said the Governor quietly.

He walked across the room to open the door for me.

There, with his hand on the door-knob, my employer paused and looked down at me almost as if he were looking at me for the first time.

It was a curious sort of stare, half-amused, half-frowning. I should think it must have lasted while one could count five. Was there a sort of *threat* in it? Yes! I suppose it meant that he wasn't going to stand any more of my masquerading impertinences, that somehow he meant to overawe me, to keep the upper hand over me still. But he won't. Of course it's rather flurrying to be looked at like that, so hard and unexpectedly. . . . But I wasn't *really* flurried—only a little glad when he opened the door, said "Good night!" and shut it after me.

I was turning towards the haven of the drawing-room when, half-way across the hall, I heard the door of the "den" open again, and the Governor's step behind me.

"I think you forgot this, didn't you?" he said, holding out to me the ring I had left lying on the top of the piano.

"Oh, *thank* you," I said apologetically. He went back into the den. I slipped my "engagement" ring on to my finger again.

As a matter of fact I *hadn't* "forgotten" it.

And he needn't imagine that he is ever going to have *me* "quelled" again. I intend taking it out of *him* all the time I am here!

CHAPTER XIV

THE FIRST QUARREL

SO far I have had things all my own way.

During the three days that I have now been staying at The Lawn, I have managed to "keep up" without difficulty two utterly distinct and different *manners*.

"Manner A."—assumed for the benefit of the Governor's family—the rather shy but charming and devoted young *fiancée*.

"Manner B."—well, to be frank, a perfect little *cat*!

But to begin with the first manner.

I should be ashamed to act it as well as I do, if it weren't that I must keep the whip-hand over the Governor, and that this is the only way, for his mother and sisters are really too sweet with me.

Never, during all the palmy days of the Trant family, have I had so many pretty and generous things said about me as I've heard in these three days from my employer's unsuspecting mother.

She told me yesterday, "When Billy was ten I'd begun to wonder whether, somewhere, some other mother was watching a pink-lined cot that held something which was to become very precious, later on, to my little son. And—twenty-one, are you, dear?—it must have been so, then. How glad I am it was you! Ten years is such a nice difference in age, too; I was twenty-one—"

And her soft grey eyes looked at me as if they saw, through me, into the past.

Her young daughter Blanche, on the other hand, gazes at me as wistfully as though, through me, she could look into the future. I feel as if I were supposed to be standing beside a wall which only I am tall enough (for once!) to see over.

"*Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?*" That, of course, isn't what she says.

"Nancy, I suppose you knew almost at once what you felt about Billy?"

"Oh, yes!" (Readily.)

"You knew he was absolutely the one and only? How lovely!" A pause. "I suppose the way to find out is to imagine him among seventeen other young men, all frightfully good-looking and nice and good sorts, and the right kind of voice, and all wanting to marry you at once, and all that? Then, if you still feel you could choose *him* out of all those—"

"But, Blanche, I should have *had* to," I explained, truthfully enough, as I thought of the five hundred pounds. "Couldn't help myself!"

"I see," sighed Blanche. "*Mustn't* it be glorious for you both?"

And thirteen-year-old Theo, pouring upon her "new sister" the wealth of superfluous adoration which will some day be wasted, I suppose, upon some quite ordinary young man, proclaims at frequent intervals, "Isn't it *ripping* having her here?" and lives entirely in the present. Theo, by the way, is the only one of them before whom I feel I have to be careful not to over-do Manner A.

Manner B. is reserved for those hours which, for the sake of appearances, his official fiancée is obliged to spend alone with Mr. Waters; going for dull walks—that is, for me they're kept from being too deadly dull by the certainty that I am making them so for him!—and sitting with him in the den, where I will *not* play accompaniments to his songs except as a last resource after I've exhausted every possibility of the stilted remark, the awkward pause, the resigned glance, and the languor that stops short only at the visible yawn. Since that first *tête-à-tête* I have brought the contrasting of Manners A. and B. to a fine art. I've been revelling in the idea that for a whole fortnight this is what my employer will be forced

to put up with. After all, it's what the whole lives of some *married* men amount to! And, according to the terms of the Governor's own agreement, there's nothing in all this of which he can openly complain!

* * * *

He *has* complained!

Really, I need not have been surprised when it occurred, though I was scarcely expecting it.

It began this (Saturday) morning, at breakfast. Now, any outsider peeping into the sunny dining-room might have considered that the group round the breakfast-table made an ideal picture of English family life.

There was the gentle, grey-gowned mother pouring out coffee. The big, blonde son of the house, dressed for the City, sitting opposite to his *fiancée*—rather silent, but presumably only out of devotion.

The *fiancée* herself, a small brunette in dull-pink linen, looking, I think I may say, the picture of girlish sweetness, and being made much of by the two younger, taller, fair-haired sisters.

For no outsider could have suspected that the small, dark girl and the big, blonde man were secretly at daggers drawn. Nor have the family a notion that I'm anything less than "the ideal wife for Billy."

I had come down last, to be greeted by the

clarion voice of Theo, now no longer muffled in my presence.

"Nancy! *Here's* news for you! Juno what? Our celebrated Uncle Albert Waters is coming down to inspect Billy's sweetheart!"

"Oh!" I said smiling. I didn't see then why I shouldn't smile. I hadn't yet heard anything about this other Mr. Waters.

"It's to be hoped that he will admire her as much as we all do," proclaimed Theodora; "because, if he doesn't, won't it be a ghastly week-end, Mother?"

"Nonsense, dear! Don't try and alarm poor Nancy about the new relation she has to meet."

"But—fancy! Meeting Uncle Albert *for the first time!* Golly!"

"Theo-dora!"

"I know. I did promise to chuck saying 'Golly,' but really it's the only word that seems at all *like* Uncle Albert," declared the child. "Uncle Albert's a terror! Talk about me-ee! Yes, talk about *me* saying everything that comes into my head! Why, it's from him that I inherit that! Only, I'm not in it with him!"

"It would be a good thing if you were, Theo," reproachfully from Mrs. Waters. "I am sure your uncle has a heart of gold."

"Always means there's something else the matter with a person"—thus the irrepressible Theo. "People with 'hearts of gold' are

either fearfully rude like old Miss Crabbe, and never say ‘Thank you,’ or they don’t care a rap what they do say, like Uncle Albert. If he doesn’t happen to approve of Billy’s *fiancée*, he’ll think nothing of telling Billy to break off——”

“Break off yourself, young woman. You talk a good deal too much,” put in her brother, as he rose, big and well-groomed, from the breakfast-table. “And keep Cariad, will you? He knows he never follows anyone but his mistress, but I’ve had to send the station-master’s boy back with him three times this week. Good-bye, all.”

“Good-bye,” said I sweetly. “Give my love to the Near Oriental, especially to the typists’ room, will you? How stuffy it will be getting there now! How thankful I am for anything that keeps *me* out of it on a morning like this! Still, I suppose one ought not to abuse the place where we first met.”

This with a glance at him, expressly for Blanche’s benefit, from under my eye-lashes. For I am acquiring a taste for positively “baiting” my employer. I’m not going to be the one made to feel all the awkwardness of the situation. Not I!

Let *him* redden with embarrassment before the guileless remarks or questions that I aim at him before his mother and sisters. Serve him right! As for my employer’s feelings towards

me, I have seen them ripening from obliviousness of my presence, through indifference and dislike, into positive *hatred*!

I knew he'd felt the flick of my last remark. I also knew how he would have liked to retaliate. Any time since that first evening in the den I have seen in his eye the yearning to take me by the shoulders and shake me.

But he said serenely : "It is a glorious morning, certainly. Too fine not to walk down to Sevenoaks, so I'm starting a little earlier."

Good ! I thought. I always welcomed the moment that saw the last, for the whole happy, idle day, of the only inhabitant of The Lawn with whom I'm not on excellent terms. Once *he's* out of the house, I can enjoy myself and forget (almost) why I'm in it.

So it was an annoying shock to me when he stopped short on his way to the door and added :

"Nancy, do you care to come part of the way towards the station with me ?"

He had me there. I saw there was no escape. For the first time this week he was able to check me in having things all my own way ; and, mortified and irritated as I felt, I could only smile up at him in Manner A, and reply, all eager delight :

"Oh, I'd love it ! Give me two minutes to put on my hat."

In five minutes—for I knew he'd loads of time

for his train, and it was still a further turning of the tables to keep the Governor waiting—I joined him outside the front door.

Presently we were walking briskly together down the drive between the green cliffs of laurel; the air was sweet with the scent of sun-warmed lilac, the sky was cloudless, the morning all sunshine—everything, in fact, was as unlike my own mood as might be.

For I'd guessed that I was “in for” something. And although I didn't yet know what this might be—although it seemed a whole pre-existence since the day when the prospect of a few words from the Head of the firm made his trembling typist feel that the end of all things was at hand!—I still felt, amongst other emotions, a little *frightened*. Again I saw in my mind that odd, half-amused, half-threatening stare which the Governor had bent upon me that first evening when I said good-night at the door of his den. Supposing I wasn't able to keep the reins in my own hands after all? A new nervousness mingled in me with an utterly new form of resentment.

I hadn't long to wait for my few words from the Governor.

He began—rather to my surprise—without his traditional “Now, Miss Trant,” but grimly and stiffly as I don't suppose Mrs. Waters knows he can speak.

"Now! There is something I wanted to say to you. I am sorry to trouble you, but I am afraid that I have to ask you to be a little more careful in your manner to me."

Which of the two manners was he going to fix upon? The one I reserved for him alone, or the pretty one that I used to him before his people?

"My manner? Oh!" I turned a dismayed face, the face of a typist caught out in some careless mistake, up to his as we walked along. "I am afraid I don't quite know what you mean."

"You do," said his face.

But he only said concisely: "I mean the tone you sometimes feel called upon to adopt towards me, as just now, at breakfast. Of course when we are alone you must please yourself entirely. But that will hardly do before others."

Ah, it was for Manner A, then, that he'd settled to take me to task. So none of it had been lost upon him, then; none of the unearthly sweetness hiding home-thrusts that only he was able to recognize as such! None of the elaborate ways in which I've been pretending to think of little things to please him; quoting (in public) bits of his songs that I call my favourites, picking a sulphur-coloured pansy—that he daren't *not* wear!—for his button-hole, then making

him take it out to let me change it for a leaf of scented geranium, because there were table decorations of those at the Savoy “the day we lunched there before you chose my ring; do you remember?” I hope he’ll never cease to remember *and to regret* “that day!”

For the whole nature of the grudge I have against him has changed in these few days. The thoughts have gone into the background of all that office drudgery and Near Oriental unpleasantness. I’ve forgotten that I used to hate him as part of a life of being ordered about on a few shillings a week. But when, in accepting this invitation to a house of luxury and leisure, I had the feeling of “coming home” to my old sort of life, I hadn’t realized how many of the feelings belonging to that by-gone life were going to wake up again inside me, indignantly ashamed. I was my father’s daughter. I was well accustomed to the ease and space and comforts of such a house as The Lawn—the Waters don’t suspect that, but I *was* born to them. I wasn’t born, however, to taking up the position in such a house which he has forced upon me. Dully simmering in my mind, for some time now, has been the thought of this slight which he has put upon me, this insult.

This was the thought that softened my voice into the timid and suppressed “office” key, which I felt I couldn’t keep up very much longer.

"Have I been saying and doing the wrong things before your people then? I am sorry!"

I hoped my voice was not going to run away with me, but I heard myself beginning to lose control over that serviceable meekness as I went on.

"It is rather difficult for me, you know. Still, I did think I *seemed* everything that your fiancée ought to be! I have been trying——"

"You have," admitted Mr. Waters grimly.
"Very."

"Do you mean I *haven't* been a success, then?" I heard myself demanding quickly.
"Oh! Because, if I don't give satisfaction——"

I stopped. It wasn't my place to finish the sentence with "I had better give notice!"

"H'm," said my employer curtly. "I see."

Did he "see," I wondered? Did he realize that, though I was bound hand and foot by that absurd muddle of an agreement, he might break it when he chose, and that I was longing, desperately, for him to do so then and there?

"It's very hard," I explained as evenly as I could, hoping that this explanation would give him his cue, "hard to manage to hit the right note always, and to have to decide every minute upon the way I should naturally behave if I really *were* engaged. Of course *I'm* under contract, but——"

Here, very suddenly and unexpectedly, Still

Waters broke out into a tone I'd never heard from him before. He positively "let himself go" as he lashed out with his walking-stick at an inoffensive dock-leaf in the hedge-row we were passing, and exclaimed :

"By Jove! I'd pity any man who was 'really engaged' to *you*!"

Ah! So I had got him to speak his mind at last, his own mind that he would have given anything not to have revealed to any employee! More than that, I'd driven him into being inexcusably rude to a woman. His face, where the tan had deepened to a sullen red, his lips, compressed into what seemed like a thin, pen-drawn line, showed me that *he* had realized this. *I* don't mean him to forget what he said. I said nothing. The most awkward of all the many awkward pauses so far, elapsed between us as we walked along, and before he spoke again. When he did, I saw that it cost him more than he liked me to notice.

"Yes. You see—I ought not to have said that. I beg your pardon."

"Oh! Please don't! I didn't mind it at all," said I, better able to speak very sweetly now that I felt I had regained some of my ascendancy. But all the fun of "scoring" off him had gone, though I must not let him see that. "Of course you've every right to say exactly what you think, just as Theo does."

For his face, still flushed, ruffled, and without a trace of the “office-mask,” wore a fleeting but quite laughable likeness to his youngest sister’s. I have heard it said of some girl, “She isn’t pretty exactly, but she has pretty looks,” and positively, if I didn’t dislike him so intensely, I should say that the Governor, though never handsome, has “handsome looks” himself.

I went on, still mildly: “Only, you know, Theo and Blanche and your mother don’t happen to think—what you’ve just said. They seem to consider that—well! that the man I was engaged to isn’t—wouldn’t be at all to be *pitiéd!*”

“I know. You needn’t tell me that. You have contrived to make all three of them ridic—extremely fond of you!” This resentfully, realizing it as part of my insolence to him. “My mother and the girls don’t see through it, when you are—are covertly reminding me, in a hundred small ways, of what I don’t need to be reminded of. *That* would be all right, therefore—only— Other people who came to the house might not be so unsuspecting *They* might chance to notice that there was something odd—unusual—unnatural in your attitude to me.”

“But—but you said any strangeness would be put down to the awkwardness of a girl so recently engaged?”

"No one would give *you* much credit for being 'awkward!'" Still more resentfully. "And something might come out. That is why I am obliged to ask you to be a little more guarded."

"More guarded," I repeated meekly, like a child who is learning by heart. "Yes. I must. I must try harder to make it seem less 'unnatural' that we two should be engaged."

Again the look, instantly banished, that meant he pined to shake me.

"Thank you," he said.

"And by the 'other people,' I suppose you mean this other—outspoken Mr. Waters who is coming over to 'inspect' me? Do you think—are you afraid that *he* will be sorry for the man who is supposed to be engaged to me?"

Under his breath Mr. William Waters muttered what sounded, at least, like the one word, "IMP!"

I heard him.

Perhaps it was only the first syllable of the word "Impertinence!"

At all events, I heard that distinctly. And though it meant I *had* scored another point and made His Imperturbability forget himself yet again, I couldn't enjoy the triumph of it, nor even laugh to myself. There had been too much of all this . . . I was suddenly tired. Tears, of fatigue, I suppose, rushed unexpectedly into my eyes, and I was obliged to turn my head

and glare over the hedge at a may-tree in full bloom that became a dancing blur of pink.

He was pretending that he hadn't begun to speak at all. He began again, stiffly :

"My uncle and another man are coming over to-night. This uncle of mine is eccentric in some ways, but extremely shrewd ; and no—er—two-edged sort of remark would be lost on him."

"I see," I said, blinking angrily at the next may-tree, but still controlling my voice. "I had better not make *any* sort of remark at all then, before him. I could be too shy to open my lips. In fact, just as I am—used to be, at the office. Would that be better ? "

"Distinctly better than—er—recent methods," said the Governor dryly. "This other man is merely a business acquaintance with whom I hope to have dealings. So——"

"You want him to be favourably impressed," I concluded intelligently, "with your *fiancée* and all your other belongings."

"If you choose to put it so. But——"

A pause.

"Above all," said the Governor, "I don't, on this particular occasion, don't want to be made to look a *fool* ! "

It came out quite boyishly and slangily, and for a moment I could almost have liked Still Waters for that. Then—yes ! I thought,

savagely, he mustn't be allowed to look a fool even for once, but I may go on looking a fool and worse, for the next year ! And then I saw that he was inwardly rating himself for having, as he considered, played into the enemy's hands—having allowed me to see exactly when and where I could get the better of him next.

He didn't trust me.

"I will do my best," I said, softly and bitterly. Let him suppose, if he chose, that I meant doing my best to let him look a fool before his uncle and his pompous fine business acquaintance, indeed. What would he amount to, I wondered, this acquaintance of the Governor's for whom I, Monica Trant, was to be on my best behaviour ? Probably someone Father wouldn't have had in the house !

We reached the turning to the station and I stopped.

"Was there anything else that you wished to speak to me about ?"

"No, thank you," said my employer at his curtest. "That was all. Good-morning !"

He lifted his hat ; his face beneath it was set with temper. Good ! Let him vent it on Mr. Dundonald at the office !

"Good-morning," I said, and turned away. I was glad that there had been no one in the lane to see that parting ; to anyone who had watched, knowing who that tall, blonde, savage-looking

man was who had said good-morning so frigidly to that small girl with her head held in a very straight line with her back, it would have looked so ludicrously like the last thing in the world that it really was—a lover's quarrel!

How furiously he had marched off! I turned round, after walking on a few yards, to catch another glimpse of that stampede.

Then I was sorry.

For at that very moment he had elected to turn round and see me!

It just shows that people are quite right to teach children *never* to turn round on the road. I wish I hadn't!

CHAPTER XV

"THE LIGHT OF OTHER DAYS"

"NANCY! I say, Nancy! Here's Billy and this new man of his turned up *hours* before we expected them, and mother's out calling somewhere, and Blanche is in the middle of washing her hair, and just look at the awful rip I've made in my frock; *I can't come!*" announced Theo in a voice subdued almost to a stage whisper when I met her on the stairs this afternoon. "So *you* be a saint and go in and talk pretty to the visitor till tea, will you?"

"All right," I laughed; and passed on to the drawing-room.

It was cool and dim in there after the sunshine of the garden, where I had been lazing over a book and forgetting this morning's stress, and for a moment my eyes could scarcely make out the two figures that stood with their backs to the white-curtained French windows.

Then, beside the Governor's tall bulk, I saw a small, dapper, masculine silhouette with a rather too abrupt "pinch-in" at the waist of

its coat, and a perky, quick turn of the head ; the general effect of Mr. Cyril Maude in some military part that I had once seen. Was it this that seemed so familiar, I wondered ?

A monocle fell with a click against a waistcoat-button ; then, as I came forward, a voice, also vaguely familiar, cried in amazement :

“ Monica Trant ! Little Monica ! Well, I am blessed ! ”

Who in the world was this that knew my name ? I looked harder at him. Surely it—Was it ?—yes ! it *was* one of father’s old friends, Major Montresor. So *this* was my employer’s “business acquaintance.” I felt myself trying not to stare. The Governor, I know, was staring undisguisedly at the pair of us.

“ Why, bless my soul, Monica ! Who’d have expected to see *you* coming in like this ? ”

“ Or you, Major Montresor ? ” I retorted, obliged to smile at him as I held out my hand to his always tenacious clasp.

To be frank, I can’t say I was at all pleased that the Governor’s visitor had turned out to be someone who’d seen me so often in the old days. I don’t want those days to be mixed up with these. Already a ghost or so out of those days had seemed inclined to come and haunt the lovely garden and the big, comfortable rooms at The Lawn ! And now I seemed to see a regular Richard-the-Third-like procession of

those ghosts rising up behind the little Major's trimly-waisted figure—people with whom I'd associated last time he'd seen me—standing in judgment, echoing his “Who'd have expected to see *you*?”—adding their phantom stares to those of the two men whose eyes were actually upon me. It was tiresome; might mean all sorts of adaptations; even the assumption of a “Manner C” for the benefit of Major Montresor! As for him, he's a rather amusing, tactless, talkative, would-be-man-of-the-world sort of person, who'd been quite ready to get up what Kipling calls the “You're-only-a-little-girl type of flirtation” with me when I was seventeen or so. I hadn't met him since, nor had I wanted to; though I had been distinctly interested, five years ago, to find that someone who possessed medals and a moustache cared to talk to me while I was still in the school-room. He'd got to look ever so much older since then, balder, stiffer of movement in his slim boots and his stays—I beg his pardon, I expect he called it his belt—and, apparently, more flirtatious than ever!

Now, any *woman* over thirty-five has to be fairly attractive before she's allowed to flirt on without fear of ridicule. But a *man* at fifty, or fifty-five, seems to claim the right to monopolize the prettiest and youngest girl he meets. It doesn't matter if he hasn't a hair on his head

or a tooth of his own in it. As long as he's single and wears trousers, he's an eligible bachelor—or so he thinks. A mercy he doesn't hear the ideas of the favoured girl on this subject !

So, quite unsuspectingly, Major Montresor beamed upon me, and declared at least three times that this was a most *delightful* surprise, upon his word!—seeming almost to forget his host, who stood a little aside, looking utterly disconcerted, as far as I could see without turning my eyes, to discover that this “business acquaintance” knew his official *fiancée* better than her employer ever could!

Christian names, too!

“Monica—Bless my soul, what’s this?”

“This” was an interruption that precipitated itself through the unlatched French window; a small white dog that bore in his mouth a large bone, noisome-smelling and of the earth, earthy, which he dumped upon the Major’s japanned boot.

“*Cariad!*” growled the Governor, more angrily than I’d ever heard him speak except to me, “what do you *mean?* Here, sir.” He grabbed him by the collar; kicking the bone violently over the shallow sill in front of him. “Sorry, I shall have to get the little brute locked up.” And he dragged the cheerfully resigned Cariad out and along the gravel to the back of the house.

"Decent sort of young fellow, Waters; very clever business-man; useful to know; quite a nice chap, too," commented the little Major, lowering his voice as he turned to me. "But, my dear child"—he always used the word "child" to excuse his gesture while he patted my shoulder, or smoothed my lace collar, or played with my silver chain—"my child, how *did* you come to be here?"

"I am staying with Mrs. Waters"—demurely.

"Well, well! So you knew them! Your poor father didn't, did he? You were at school with the girls of the house, perhaps?"

"No. I met Mr. Waters"—still more demurely—"in business."

"Business? Upon my word! Glad you've got such a business-adviser. Glad you're in the position to need one, Monica. I heard rumours of your poor father having left you not very well off. Odd how these untrue bits of gossip get about!"—with an experienced eye upon the expensive new afternoon frock of my preferred pink, with its creamy ruffle, black velvet bow, and small paste buckle. "You look the picture of prosperity and health and good looks, if you'll allow an old friend to say so?"

Well, one simply *has* to "allow" things to people who call themselves "old." But for that, how many "old friends" would have received the order of "Paws off!" or "No

patting, please," or a more politely expressed equivalent from the girls who can't be rude to their father's contemporaries?

I was only just about to draw my hand away from another long and tender squeeze of Major Montresor's, when his host came back to us. Through the French window, as the Governor pushed it open, a ray of sunlight caught and blazed on the magnificent diamonds of the ring which had been bought at Gemmer's for me to wear.

Instantly Major Montresor pounced on that other hand.

"Hal-lo! What's this? It isn't——?"

"Yes," said I, sedately.

"Little Monica engaged?"

"Yes."

"Come, not really, what? No! You don't say so, really?"

"I am afraid I must, Major Montresor."

"By—Jove! And I never heard! Here's a blow!" He sighed tempestuously. "Well! Youth will be served! Fortunate youth!" he prattled on without a break. "I'm sure he's to be congratulated, the dog. Always hanging round you in the old days, I remember. Yes! Cultured sort of young Johnny with a beard—what was his name, now? Ah, I have it—Vandeleur, of course, young Sydney Vandeleur!"

Pleasant for me, wasn't it? To have this voice from the Past blurting out—less tactful

even than Cicely!—the name of the lover I had lost. In a flash I saw my employer's slight movement—saw by the passing look on his face that his "business-man's memory," which never forgets a name, had instantly associated that of "Vandeleur" with those people at the Carlton to whom I'd first introduced my "*fiancé*." What must he imagine? Still, that wasn't the point. The point was that he should explain to this gossiping little Major, as quickly as possible, how things really—I mean officially, stood! To my horror he didn't speak. There was an agonizing pause. I shot a glance at the Governor. . . . Heavens! He, of all people, seemed utterly at a loss—fidgeting like a schoolboy; he who could "break the news" to his staff at the office without turning a hair, was leaving it all, here, apparently to *me*!

Well!

Hurriedly I was beginning:

"But, Major Montresor—" when the drawing-room door opened to the entrance of Mrs. Waters, in her soft grey satin wrap and black picture hat; Cariad, liberated and tail-wagging, in her wake.

Greetings were exchanged—what talk followed I scarcely heard, until the gentle voice of the Governor's mother exclaimed:

"Oh! Then you had met my son's *fiancée*?"

"*Fiancée*?" echoed Major Montresor. His

monocle dropped again, so did his jaw. I never saw a man so utterly, so comically taken aback. He wheeled abruptly, to stare from me to the Governor, then back to his hostess again. "Your son's? Am I to understand that it is *he* who is engaged to Miss Trant?"

Here at last the Governor did find his tongue.

"I have that honour," he said, clearing his throat, taking a step forward, and looking down at the little Major just as some tawny Great Dane might have looked at Cariad—but no! No big dog can ever look as utterly silly—there's no other word for it—as a man who doesn't know what to say next. And he who had, it appeared, particularly wished to avoid being made to look a fool on this occasion—Well! He must admit that it was none of *my* doing that he stood there looking like that!

"Well, well, well! I suppose I shall have to grin and bear it and congratulate you, Waters," rattled off Major Montresor. "I certainly do congratulate you!"

"Doesn't feel *sorry* for you," I added mentally, hoping the unspoken comment showed in the one glance I allowed myself to steal at my employer as I crossed over to sit on the low chintz couch beside his mother, while the visitor talked on.

"Still, you might have prepared me for this, my dear fellow. You might have given your

heart-broken rival some warning. Let me down a bit gently, eh ? about how you were robbing me of the one girl I'd hoped might solace my declining years. Met Miss Trant, Mrs. Waters ? Bless my life, rather ! Used to billet myself for months at Colonel Trant's house in the old days —ripping old place it was, too ; gorgeous beech avenue ; lawn something like your own here, but sweeping away down to the river—oh, ripping ! What's become of the place now, Miss Monica ; let, I suppose ? "

" Sold," I said, shortly.

Without looking up from the patch of carpet on which Missis's little dog slumbered with his muzzle resting against my shoe, I could feel the change that came into my employer's grey glance—the half-disconcerted "M'm. News to *me*, all this !" expression that just flicked across his face. His mother's hand made a little movement towards mine—and for some reason I felt that she was a little sorry . . . I was furious ! Why on earth couldn't this little he-gossip—though why they should understand by the word "gossip" an old woman, I never *shall* know—why couldn't he allow these people to go on thinking that the typist her employer had chosen to honour had never been before inside any sort of house but one of a row of seventy or eighty, all with the same sort of pot-plants hiding what lay beyond the Nottingham lace curtained windows,

with the same neat front door, and the same metaphorical wolf crouched grimly in front of it ! Desperately I wished that something might suddenly deprive Major Montresor of the power of speech, only I suppose nothing ever could do *that* !

Evidently he wasn't going to spare me anything. I was to stand full in the limelight of other days.

"Hope the new tenants will keep it up as they should, then, that's all"—genially. "They took on the fishing with it, I suppose ? 'Everything went together.' What ? I see. Hope they'll take as much pride as your poor father did in those magnificent hot-houses of his. Ah, I've never tasted peaches like those, anywhere else ! Remember how you used to race me down to get the finest peach before breakfast, Monica ? Yes, hang it all, I think I shall have to ask your leave to go on calling her that, Waters. Loved her from childhood's hour, y'see. Her childhood's, not mine, of course ! "

"Oh," murmured the Governor.

Miss Robinson would have been kept in high spirits for the next week by that "Oh."

It didn't amuse *me* much as I sat there, carrying out to the letter my promise to say nothing and look shy. I was feeling at least as embarrassed as I looked by the time tea was brought in and the girls made their appearance ; Blanche with

her fair hair unmanageably soft from its washing ; Theo, as usual, all eyes for the visitor. I hoped they might distract his attention from me—they're quite young enough !—but no ! All the time he was sipping his tea and munching slice after slice of cake, the little Major continued to pour out comment after embarrassing comment upon my affairs, addressing himself chiefly now to the Governor.

He sat looking still more hopelessly uncomfortable and bigger than ever in contrast to the frail china tea-cup and the slice of wafer-like bread-and-butter in his clutch. Why do people allow men in at drawing-room teas ? Why couldn't those two have been having theirs in the billiard-room—the garage—*anywhere*—where I could have been saved from Major Montresor's relentless flow of conversation ?

" And to think I should have known you all these months without suspecting that your gain was to be my loss—no, no, I don't mean the business part of it, my boy. I mean this engagement of yours, ha, ha ! And then—funny thing ! to be congratulating the wrong man."

" Oh, *were* you ? " burst suddenly, irrepressibly, from Theo, unable to check the following " Who ? "

" *Theo-dora*, dear ! "

" Ah, never mind, never mind ! " took up the little Major, turning quickly to the child and

smiling from her to me. "I don't tell tales out of school, young lady. But brown eyes"—with another monocled glance at those wide search-lights under the yellow curls—"brown eyes always stand for fickleness! There must have been a dozen at least of us that you treated disgracefully, Monica, eh? One comfort is I'm not the *only* sufferer!"

He was not!

My heart sank lower and lower at the thought that this garrulous little blunderer was to stay for dinner. And the other expected guest, the outspoken uncle, was to be here for the whole week-end! What would *he* be like? Not worse than Major Montresor—that was the single ray of comfort. Nothing *could* be worse! Still, the two together—what a prospect!

Even as I was shuddering over it, the sound of some confused commotion was borne in to us from the hall; and then a loud, bluff, breezy voice positively shouted:

"Name? My good woman, you're pretty new to this house, or you'd know my name. Same as your master's. No! Don't announce me. I'll announce myself." (As if this were necessary!) "Where are they all? Tea? Good! Young lady there too? Excellent!"

The door, this time, burst open, and in *avalanchèd* (it's the only word) Uncle Albert Waters.

CHAPTER XVI

THE ORDEAL BY INSPECTION

IN looks, Uncle Albert Waters was just like the John Bull of the cartoons, minus the hat. In voice, he was Theo through a megaphone. In manner, a genial form of hurricane.

"Now then, now then ! How's everybody ?" he blared. "Mary ! Blanche ! Theo !" (An explosive kiss to each.) "Ha ! Billy, my boy !" (A violent blow on the shoulder.) "Major Montresor, glad to see you again—how are you ? Still defying the enemy ? Splendid !" (A pump-handle shake of the hand.) "Now, Billy !" turning again to my employer. "You needn't introduce *me* to your sweetheart. She knows who I am, and what I've come for. What I want is to have a good look at *her*. Young lady," to me, "will you be kind enough to oblige an old man whose eyesight's not quite what it was, by turning full to the light ?"

I did. What else could I do ?

I sat, facing the low flood of late afternoon

sunshine, and feeling without seeing that all the others turned a little away from me, while Uncle Albert fixed his prominent, honest grey eyes upon my face and stared at it without reserve for—well! it seemed several of the longest minutes I'd ever known. Then judgment was pronounced.

"Well done, Billy!" Here there would have been another of those heavy blows upon the Governor's broad shoulder, but he had edged away. "You've chosen well, boy. A bonnie girl, and a well-bred one, and one to do you credit. Now, Mary, I'm ready for that tea. And, you, my dear"—meaning me—"pass me the bread and butter. What's your name, now?"

"My full name is Monica," I said for the benefit of Major Montresor who had fixed the monocle with something like mild indignation upon the last comer. "They call me Nancy, here."

"Nancy. A pretty name for a pretty girl, appropriate, too. '*All my fancy dwells upon Nancy'*'—eh, William? You used to sing that song once upon a time, dare say you haven't forgotten it, now?"

And so on, and so forth. I really don't know how much more of it there was before the dreadful old man had finished his ample tea and was carried off to his room by the Governor in —

much the same humour, I thought, as he had dragged Cariad and his bone to the back of the house.

A pity Uncle Albert Waters couldn't be locked up in the tool-house!

I felt like murder when I reached my pretty room at last. What a day it had been! It had seemed forty-eight hours long at least. Beginning with that horrible walk to the station with the Governor—Then there had been the unwelcome appearance of Major Montresor and his clumsy blunderings, first about Sydney and secondly about the old times at home—and now this terrible old Uncle turning up to inspect and blare out his embarrassing verdict upon my looks and suitability; oh, it's the last straw!

It's the worst that's happened yet! There *can* be nothing to beat the Governor's Uncle at tea, even though the evening isn't yet over. I feel as if it were long past bed-time, and there's only half an hour or so before dressing for dinner! Even half an hour alone—

But I haven't been allowed a minute of it alone.

The girls fluttered into my room almost as soon as I came up; brimful of sympathy, but not sympathetic enough to keep themselves from laughter.

“Poor dear Nancy! Wasn't it awful?”

" Didn't I tell you Uncle Albert was a terror ? But you don't think he really *talks* like me, Nancy, do you ? Billy *will* say he *does* ! "

" Theo ! He can *easily* hear you from his room, and the window's open. Oh, I do hope that when I'm engaged my young man won't have *quite* such loud relations ! "

" Better than having deceitful whispery voices and saying horrid things in them about you behind your back," retorted Theo. " And anyhow, Uncle Albert did *like* her ! "

" Yes," said Blanche, deprecatingly, " but isn't it nearly as terrible as if he disapproved ? "

" It's *worse*," I decided to myself as I dressed for dinner, in my white, to please Theo, who apparently has some mysterious child's reason for wanting me to wear that particular frock to-night. " Even if one were madly in love, a relation like that would be quite enough to make one wonder if it were worth it ! Yes ! Even if one were *really* engaged to be married to a man—the man Mr. Waters would ' pity,' one would break it off rather than put up with such an uncle-in-law. Well ! Thank goodness I'm spared *that* at all events ! I hope Uncle Albert won't pay many of his visits of inspection during the next year. One or two ought to be enough for him, and I've taken the plunge now," thought I, " and got it over. He can't go on being much more awful at dinner ! "

CHAPTER XVII

THEO SITS UP

YES! It was all of a piece with the fiascoes of the day that my little watch gained ten minutes, hurrying me through my dressing and down, before I'd any need for such haste, into the drawing-room.

Here, big and black-and-white against the giant pink roses of the chintz couch, I found (as I needn't have hoped not to find, on this day of *contretemps*!) my employer alone.

He sprang to his feet, of course, and wheeled forward a chair for me (looking as if he wished he could have pushed it and me through the French windows and out of the house for ever! —Goodness knows I reciprocated that wish!) and I sat down.

Then ensued what I'm beginning to call to myself "one of our pauses."

But I felt that this evening my nerves wouldn't stand silence—that nothing could float me over these quicksands of awkwardness but an unceasing ripple of small-talk. If *he* wouldn't,

I must say something ; anything ! The first thing that came into my head !

" H—how close it is ! Do you think there will be thunder to-night ? "

There was suppressed thunder enough on his face as he answered politely : " It is getting rather stifling. Perhaps you would like the window open ? " and he rose and walked across to it.

Then, from under the chintz valance of the couch where he'd been sitting, there emerged a small and cringing form with an enormous white satin bow tied to his collar.

" Poor Cariad ! " I went on, patting the unusually subdued little dog, " you *have* got a smart new tie ! Don't you like it ? "

A one-sided conversation didn't meet the case, so the " dumb animal " (as they call it) gave me the cue for my next remark to the almost equally dumb human being.

" I've always wanted to know where he got his rather curious name," I said. " What *does* it mean ? "

" It's Welsh," explained my employer abruptly, still standing by the open window. " It means ' Sweetheart ' "—if you must know, his tone concluded.

" Oh. . . . Is he a Welsh terrier ? "

" We got him from Wales. From a little place in Anglesey where my people sometimes

go for the summer holidays," my employer vouchsafed, with an effort. "Porth Cariad the name of it is—'Port Sweetheart.'"

"Fancy calling a *place* that!" I took up, with the one idea of keeping this conversation from coming to a dead stop. "But some people call *anything* that!" (I was wondering inwardly what this last remark could possibly mean even as I went on.) "Is it by the sea?"

"Er—I think so."

"Oh, yes; ports generally are, of course. . . . Is it—is it a *pretty* place at all?"

"Quite. It hasn't been spoilt yet. Charming little bay. The usual sort of thing." (Pause.)

"Yes? *Do* tell me about it!"

"Oh! I don't know—There are about two cottages. No end of gorse—heather."

"How lovely!" Then, scenting another pause, I hurried on—"Isn't there anything *else* there?"

"Well—There's a sort of woman."

"A woman? Really? How interesting! What sort of a woman?"

"Oh, a *wooden* one," returned the Governor, who was too obviously thinking about something else. A wooden woman! What *could* he mean by it? But before I could begin my next question the door opened; the Governor turned quickly, then, seeing who came in, he exclaimed in accents of concentrated disgust:

"Theo! Isn't it time you were in bed?"

"No! Because I'm not going! I'm going to sit up for dinner, just for this once!" announced the child, triumphantly advancing upon us in a Prize-Day "effect" of let-down white skirts and long, cream-silk-stockinged legs. "I asked Mother, and that nice old man" (Poor Major Montresor!) "begged her to let me, and I may! So there! Nancy, *don't* you like the way I've done my hair for it?"

She had tied a fillet of white satin—a bit of the same ribbon which was disconcerting Cariad—about her short curls.

"What's that for? To keep your brains from bursting through?" demanded her brother crossly. But Theodora only tossed that yellow posy of a head of hers, retorting that Major Montresor thought she was sixteen, and was going to sit next her, and that there would be a *surprise* at dinner!

* * * *

The surprise—or the series of surprises—didn't dawn upon me in its full hideousness all at once.

In the dim-shaded dining-room, where the tall maids flitted noiselessly to and from the hatch at one end, the round table about which the seven of us sat down seemed, with its many candles in the curving arms of Sheffield

candlesticks, its gleaming white porcelain, and its winking, patterned array of silver and cut glass, like some great oasis of softly-radiant light. Upon it, as table-centre, there was set the silver-bordered pool of an oval mirror, reflecting a large silver goblet, round which I could read part of the inscription :

1896
FIFTY YARDS SWIM—
SECS. 6—
W. WAT—

that upheld a pyramid of creamy, perfumed blossom, softened with sprays of feathery white. Budding spikes of the same blossom were massed about the pedestals of four little winged Loves, offering baskets that held tiny bouquets of the white sprays, mingled with chocolates wrapped up in silver-foil. Gradually but surely I realized the effect of all this decoration ; it was indescribably, unmistakably, blatantly—*bridal* !

And then I realized who was responsible for it. That gift of Heaven, Theodora, was beaming upon her handiwork.

It must have been her innocent hands, too, that had tied up each table-napkin with a white bow and a spray of buds ; had cut silver-paper out of a chocolate-box into the miniature horseshoes that lay strewn negligently but

broadcast all over the tablecloth; and had encircled the place where I sat with a wreath of crystallized rose-leaves in the shape of a heart.

With one frantic sweep of my hand I brushed these last into the table-napkin on my lap. I must pretend I'd noticed nothing, and then (though I knew that thunder-cloud was deepening every moment on the Governor's brow) perhaps the others really *wouldn't* notice!

Vain hope!

It was dashed even before the two usually so sedate maids, who seemed, this evening, to emanate some subtle atmosphere of sympathy and giggle, had finished handing round the soup.

"Dear me! Who arranged the flowers like this?" murmured Mrs. Waters, with a mildly bewildered glance at this white-and-silver display. "I thought Blanche was going to have just the little crystal tubs with the pink Maman Cochets and some maidenhair fern?"

"Yes, Mumsie, I was. But Theo *would* put white heather and syringa!"

"Because— Oh, can't you see *why*?" broke in the cornet voice of the youngest of the family, who sat between me and the Major.

And before anyone could answer or check her, this appalling child went on to give chapter and verse for each of her enormities.

"It's because, you see, syringa's so awfully like orange-blossoms!—They call it 'mock

orange !' And I meant it for Billy and Nancy !'"

She paused for breath (so did everybody else), then she hurried on.

"Yes ! I did the table, because I wanted it to be appropriate ! So I took away those everyday bon-bon dishes and fetched out these little china Cupids to hold the choc'lates instead ! *Aren't they ducky ?*"

No one responded, but every eye was upon Theo, who took it all for approval and beamed again, enlarging upon her arrangements.

"And that's why I got Nancy to put on her white satin"—

(*Ah !*)

—"with those lace lilies round her front, so's she could look more like a *bride* !"

(What I did look like at that moment I don't know. But the Governor couldn't have looked more like the executioner in a cloak-and-dagger film drama.)

"And *do* you see the confetti, of those teeny silver horseshoes, and the pink rose-leaves strewn over—Oh, Nancy!"—reproachfully—"Look what's happened to the Heart ! And that was supposed to be Billy's !"

Here I saw the mouth of Uncle Albert, who was sitting facing me at Mrs. Waters' right hand, open in readiness for that approving bellow of his. "Never mind, I'll make another.

I wanted to do it all like this the first evening she came down," explained Theo further. "Only, of course, we weren't quite sure then whether she'd like it—"

(*Like it!*)

—"but it *was* all my idea!"

Then came the bellow of laughter, and—"A jolly good idea too, Kiddie!" from the other of my employer's "loud relations," his odious uncle. "Very pretty, Theo!"

"Yes, I thought it would be rather sweet! Doesn't *Billy*?" said the child, with a half-defiant look towards the Head of the House, who looked—there is no denying it—as if he were longing to kick someone. He *did* kick—a smothered yelp from under the table told me what. He had vented some of his feelings upon the little dog whose name meant "Sweetheart" in Welsh—who came from that port—one of those by the sea! where there are two cottages and a wooden woman—whatever that meant! The taller of the parlour-maids, handing lobster *soufflé* to her master, wasn't wooden enough, nor quick enough in repressing her smile.

A glare of reproof was her portion as he refused the dish, and a peremptory, "Move that—er—thing. It's in the way!" with a jerk towards the silver pot that held the spraying conservatory plant.

"Oh, what a shame!" protested Theo loudly,

as this emblem was borne away. "And I'd specially *put* it so that it *shouldn't* be in his way when he wanted to look at Nancy!"

"*'Comes there much more of it?'*" I quoted to myself, but I caught Major Montresor's eye; he was looking puzzled, almost sorry for me! And that nerved me up to laughing (I flatter myself, quite naturally!) as I murmured to Theo that she was a sentimental little goose!

"Sentimental? A good thing if she is!" took up Theo's irrepressible uncle. "I like it. In these highly-educated days it's a good sign! Yes, I like to see the young folks still taking an interest in watching a real Romance, instead of stuffing up their heads with nothing but mixed hockey and hunger-strikes and rubbish of that sort! That never brought a girl a sweetheart yet, *did* it, Mary? *Does* it, Nancy? And that's all a girl's there for, when you get down to bedrock. I may be a bit behind the times—"

As he was the only person talking at the table, he was considerably "behind" with his dinner. Unheeding, he discoursed on all through the *entrée* and the saddle of mutton.

"Yes! I may be hackneyed and old-fashioned, but that's what I feel. What do you say, Major?"

What chance had the Major of saying anything? The whole conversation had been

pretty equally divided between the two *enfants terribles*—the girl of thirteen and the man of sixty.

“Plenty of Romance in our young days! All over for us now! Still, we enjoy seeing the rising generation keep it up! Good luck to ‘em. White heather for luck, eh? Yes, yes! Must have one of those little sprigs in my button-hole—memento of a very happy occasion!—Bless my soul, everybody finished except me? I talk too much, ha-ha!—must get on.”

He went on eating very quickly, talking between mouthfuls.

“‘Mock-orange,’ eh? Capital! Hope it won’t be long before we all see *real* orange-blossom, a wreath of it, round the pretty head of a certain young lady in white! Yes! dash it all, Mary, I must drink that in champagne.”

He took champagne.

So did I. I felt I was going to need it!

Mrs. Waters let it foam and sizzle into her glass; Blanche, though murmuring that the horrid stuff always reminded her of seltzer-water that the knives had been washed in, sipped at it for the sake of the “occasion.” Major Montresor took it—reverting afterwards to his invariable whisky and soda.

The only “grown-up” who didn’t take it was my employer. Still Waters refused his usual peg and drank plain water.

Every now and then he seemed to be making spasmodic efforts to remember that he had guests under his roof ; but they weren't successful ! This added to my discomfort ! I saw his mother glance at him, but only once, and with a half-humorous little smile ! Didn't she *mind* the fact of the host remaining well over the verge of unmitigated sulks ? Apparently not ! Possibly she's seen him in his tantrums before now—even though she didn't know the reason of these ! I was feeling almost thankful that one of the guests was such a host in himself ; thankful, up to a point, for Theo's gusto ! For the child who was "sitting-up" grew more excited as each course was handed round. With her rose-flushed cheeks, her tossed curls from which the white fillet had slipped crookedly down over one eyebrow, her roving brown gaze, and her giggling spirits that raced higher and higher with the bubbles in the glasses (of the others), she was the model of an infant Bacchante. "Sitting-up !" It was her wretched brother whom she was causing to sit up, and his still more wretched official *fiancée* ! The only thing to do was for both of us to rise to the situation. Only he wouldn't—or couldn't. So, once more *I* had to.

There is after all a certain relief in feeling you've reached the climax of all things, and that Fate *cannot* have anything worse in store !

And this I *did* feel when Uncle Albert, having tossed off his toast, expressed a wish to know what sort of place the young folks fancied for their honeymoon.

"Oh, the Riviera!" was what I rushed into the breach with here. "It would be so glorious to see palms and flowering oleanders, and casinos, and scent all growing wild!—I mean the Parma violets for it—against a brilliant blue sea—such a treat to see a really bright blue bay and golden sunshine in the middle of winter——"

"Winter?" put in Uncle Albert quite indignantly. "But my dear, we're well on into June now; you aren't going to keep this poor Billy of yours"—with a wave of the hand towards the head of the table—"waiting for his wedding till November or December, surely?"

"Oh—er—why not?—we thought so."

"We thought—that is, Miss—er—*she* said," blurred out the Governor desperately, "that a year's engagement was——"

"Far too long, my boy!" interrupted his uncle peremptorily, "far too long! Don't you give in to her about that! Why wait, Billy? What the dickens is there to wait *for*? (What's this—ice? No, thanks.) Why, when I was a fine young fellow of your age, if I'd got a bonnie girl like that to look kindly at me, and enough money to keep her in style, I'd not have rested

until I'd clapped a plain gold ring on the top of those diamonds on her finger. Nothing like settling down happily as soon as you've got the chance. Like that picture—what is it—oh, you know ! Finest picture that ever was painted, I consider—in the Royal Academy years ago—prints of it in every shop-window—what's the name of the thing ? ”

“ ‘ *My friend Mr. White* ’ ? ” suggested the Major.

“ No, no ; *what the dickens* is it ? A really beautiful thing, now, if I could only remember— ”

“ ‘ *Hope*,’ by G. F. Watts ? ” put in the Governor’s mother softly.

“ No ! ”

“ ‘ *Harmony* ’ ? ” suggested Blanche.

“ ‘ *Simple Aveu* ’ —no—‘ *The Soul’s Awakening*,’ Uncle Albert ? ” fortissimo from Theo.

“ No—none o’ those. You all know it, though. I shall think of the name in a minute. Anyhow, I shall give these two young people the best print to be got of it, to hang up in their hall.”

And his prominent grey eyes seemed to be staring over my head at some imaginary plan of this entrance !

“ Only, they must hurry up, mind ! No more of this nonsense about their waiting a twelve-month and courting all the love away ! Happy’s

the wooing that's not long a-doing : isn't that right, Major ? ”

“ Quite, quite ! ” Major Montresor got his word in edge-ways at last. “ To my sorrow ” (old humbug !) “ be it spoken ! You see, Waters, the longer you play your fish, the more likely he—that is, *she*—is to get away ! You've got to put on all the strain your tackle will bear at *once* ! ”

“ Hear that, Bill ? ” (The Governor was looking as if *he* would not be able to stand much more strain of this kind.) “ Put it all on at once—excellent advice ! And where are you going to have the wedding, Mary ? Here, I daresay ? ”

“ *I* had hoped so,” said Mrs. Waters, with her pretty smile at me.

“ Oh, yes ; *here*, Uncle Albert ! ” cried Blanche, who, I know, would regard this wedding as a dress-rehearsal of her own. And then she and Theo began to enlarge, in a kind of two-part pæon, on this function that will never be.

“ A big tent on the lawn——”

“ Red carpet across the gravel——”

“ A *huge* wedding-cake just in that very place”—with a bacchanalian gesture towards the mirrored table-centre. “ All the lovely presents put out in the den——”

“ Too small, Blanche ! I know Uncle Albert will want to give them *all* his furniture.”

"In mother's bedroom, then ! We could easily get it to look like not that at all !"

"Yes, and Billy and Nancy standing up in the drawing-room together for all the people to look at and shake hands with, and kiss——"

(Here a sound as of the word "Pup-chick!" from the other parlourmaid, who was disposing the finger-glasses.)

"Yes, and showers of confetti dropping out of everybody's hat for weeks afterwards——"

"And the band playing like anything all the time—all the wedding-marches and glides and rag time and all the waltzes that make you feel you *must* dance——"

"And a white satin slipper tied on to the back of the motor when they go away——"

"Yes ! One of mine, so's you can see it ! Oh, won't it be a gorgeous day !" trumpeted Theo, bounding up and down as if wire springs only held her to her chair. "Oh, *why* isn't it going to be next week ? Still, even this evening is *almost* as good as a sort of wedding-breakfast ! Don't you think so, everybody ? With Nancy looking so sweet in that dress, and the way I've done the table, and the champagne, and everything ? Only, in one way"—crescendo—"it's *better* ! Because, if it were the *real* wedding, the bride and bridegroom would be leaving us to-night ! And as it is, they're staying on," concluded Theodora, with a peal of rapturous

laughter, “and there’ll be *no* horrid good-byes to say, and *no* crying!”

“*Won’t* there!” came from the straight lips of her brother, in a grimmer and more deadly tone than even I had ever heard. “*You’ll* be crying, miss, before the evening’s over.”

And, to anticipate a little, she *was*.

In half an hour or so, the easily-wounded heart of thirteen was being sobbed out on her pillow. For when, after the gratifications of a “quite grown-up bow” from Major Montresor and a prophecy from Uncle Albert that it wouldn’t be many years now before Theo had a wedding-breakfast-table of her own to decorate, the child had turned a glowing face up to her brother’s, she had received only the curtest of “good nights” dropped over his shoulder.

To me the thought of that farewell glimpse of him was nothing less than a reprieve.

“Thank goodness that, as he’s got two men-guests to attend to, it’ll be the last of him that I shall be obliged to put up with this evening!” thought I, as I rose to follow Mrs. Waters. “He’ll have to disappear into the den or the billiard-room with *them*. *I* shall have an evening off. Yes! a regular ‘evening off,’ like the maids! Only, I suppose, a housemaid uses those evenings to *see* her young man. With me, it’s just the other way round. ‘No followers allowed’

indeed! ‘Nothing BUT following’ has been my trouble. So hurray for a nice peaceful evening in the drawing-room with his mother and Blanche. After that *ghastly* meal, how I shall enjoy the rest!”

Even as I was congratulating myself upon it, my hopes were again dashed to the ground—this time, of course, by the hand of Uncle Albert.

“No, no, Billy. The Major and I are too old not to let you have your bit of time to yourselves now, aren’t we, Montresor?”

“*Rather!*” with hollow geniality from the Major.

Apparently it’s one thing for a man to mention his “declining years” and add about fifteen of them to his age. It’s quite another to find himself claimed as a contemporary by a man who’s ten years older than he is!

“We two old fogies can look after ourselves, my boy. We’re not going to keep you in here, away from your girl. Not a word!—that’s quite all right—quite understood! Been young ourselves once, though you may not believe it—off with you!”

And, to my unspeakable fury, he closed the dining-room door upon what he’s pleased to call “these young people.” The door of the drawing-room had already been shut upon Mrs. Waters and Blanche!

Was there to be *no* respite, then, after the awful

meal I had just sat through? A nice evening it had been—this dinner which I suppose had been meant to be so jolly for all of us, as well as for the two guests! Well! at the end of it all here was Major Montresor piqued; Theo in tears; the parlourmaids glared at, and Cariad kicked! Even Uncle Albert hadn't been able to remember the name of the horrible picture, whatever it was, that he meant to give "us."

And now here was I, left stranded once more face to face with my fuming employer; only, this time, with the memory of that child's light-hearted mockery of stage-management between us!

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIRST KISS

"WELL! I suppose there is nothing for it but to go in here," I said, marching, with my head well up, to the door of the den.

The Governor was only just in time to open it for me. Without a look at him I walked in, making straight for the piano-stool.

I sat down. I planted my foot firmly upon the loud pedal. My fingers clutched at the first chords of a spirited war-song as if it were a life-buoy.

"Do sing!" I heard myself fling almost imperiously at my employer.

He sang—not well.

"And please keep on singing," I said, into the last chords of the song. "*Loud* ones, please."

Without any further conversation, we went doggedly through "*Drake's Drum*" and "*The Two Grenadiers*."

I simply wasn't going to let Uncle Albert Waters, left in the dining-room with Major

Montresor, imagine that his nephew and I had gone into the den to—to make anything but—music for one single instant that evening. Let them hear for themselves that we were busy at the piano the whole time !

They could hear well enough through the wall of the dining-room——

No ! Apparently they couldn't hear well enough. For no sooner had we come to the end of those bars of the "*Marseillaise*" that conclude the Grenadier song, than the door of the den was thrown open and in walked those two other men.

Uncle Albert, of course in advance, pranced up to the piano, thumped his fist into the open palm of the other hand, leaned over the piano towards us, then, in a solemn, confidential, impressive tone of voice, he brought out—one word. It was the word :

“*Wedded !*”

“What ?” rapped out the Governor, sharply wheeling round. And I couldn't help gasping, wondering if this old gentleman had suddenly come under some hallucination about our being more, even, than merely “engaged.”

“Yes. ‘*Wedded,*’” repeated Uncle Albert, raising his voice again to its normal blare. “You know !—The fellow and the girl ! That first-rate picture by Millais or Holman Hunt or one of ‘em. Anyhow, you know it. She's got

her head resting right back against the young chap's shoulder, like this"—

(Unsuccessful imitation of the pose of Leighton's model by Uncle Albert against the piano.)

"—And he's lifting her hand to his mouth—you know. That's the one. That's the name I was puzzling over half through dinner, and it only just dawned upon me just as I finished my cigar. I had to come in and tell you. And, if we're not *de trop*," added that appalling old man, settling down like a big collapsible toy in one of the huge arm-chairs, "we'd like to hear just one tune in here. 'If he's only *singing*,' as I said to the Major, 'he might just as well have company by as not, and I'm fond of a good song after dinner!' So now, Billy, what have you got there? D'you know that A i thing—ah, what is it? What a man I am for forgetting names! Something bandy—not Bandy-legs——"

"Ha!" Major Montresor, from the other big chair, came to the rescue. "'The Bando-lero'!"

"That's it! Know it, William? 'I am the Bando-lero!'" vociferated Uncle Albert, "'the—something—Bando-lero——'!"

"I know it," said my employer, with restraint, "but I haven't got it in the house!"

It was my turn to suppress a smile as I remembered how, in my nursery-days, I'd defined "*a bandolero*" as "*a person with a very loud*

voice," just as naturally as I used to think that "a Radical" meant "a dreadfully wicked man." It was the very song that I could imagine Uncle Albert enjoying singing himself. A pity his nephew didn't happen to have it in the house !

"You have this, though," I suggested helpfully, as I turned to the rack and took out "*The Storm-Fiend,*" with a look at the Governor meaning, "Don't dare to say you loathe this thing!" (It was because he did, by the way, that the song had been ordered for him in a burst of unsisterliness by Theo.)

"Yes! *You* can look soft nothings at the girl, my boy!" was Uncle Albert's interpretation of that glance of the Governor's as I spoke, "but she's got to keep those pretty dark eyes of hers for the music!"

(—And I wonder the sheet of music didn't shrivel up under the gaze of the eyes thus praised !)

We then proceeded to dash through "*The Storm-Fiend.*" I wondered whether the Governor found in the loud singing of it as much of a safety-valve as I found in the playing of the artillery-like accompaniment !

"Bravo! Very good! Stirring song, that!" Uncle Albert's bellow swelled the echoes of the last chord. "Capital song—very well sung. I like that tune—'I chuckle and laugh, ho, ho !'

I chuckle and laugh, ho, ho ! ’’ he persisted (to some tune quite of his own). “ ‘ *The Storm-Fiend is the Lord—of—Woe ! ’* Very good ! Still, not very appropriate for to-night, Billy ? Not much Woe about this evening, my dear, eh ? ” (to me). “ Supposing we have a bit of sentiment now. What was that other song, now ? I was talking about it only at tea-time here—something tally-ho-ish that we could all join in the chorus of.”

But here I felt I simply must nip in the bud a request for the one about—

“ *All my Fancy dwells upon Nancy.*”

“ Nancy ” had had *enough* !

So I rose, saying gently, “ If you will excuse me, I am rather tired”—

This was no fib !

—“ and I think I will go to bed early. Good night, Mr. Waters,” politely to that awful Uncle Albert. “ Good-bye, Major Montresor ; so nice to have seen you again like this. . . . Good-night,” with a little nod to my official fiancé.

“ ‘ *Be the day weary, be the day long. . . .’* ” I thought. But we hadn’t even yet come to the end of it.

For Uncle Albert Waters had bounded up again from the deep chair like a large india-rubber ball, with yet another protest to his nephew.

"What's that? what's that? Ah, but that'll never do. Never!" reverberated through the den. "You're never going to let the girl go off like that, Billy?—Just a word and a nod?"

Good heavens—what could he mean?

"Why! She'd never think anything of you again, lad! Never mind two old has-beens like us. We don't count, do we, Major? Don't you take any notice of us. You kiss your sweetheart good night, like a sensible youngster!" And before I could escape, before either of us had fully realized what this terrible, bellowing, stout, red-faced, eyes-on-stalked, cigar-scented, coarse, *horrid* old man would take it into his head to say or do next, he had literally pushed us into each other's arms.

I don't know whether it was for a minute or for half a second that I was given over to feeling the true horror of this position; to wondering what on earth my make-believe *fiancé* meant me to do about it—what *he* meant to do.

Then he—the Governor—decided the matter for me.

With the suddenest of movements he ducked swiftly forward and bent, without further look or word, to kiss me. I was too petrified to draw back even the fraction of an inch from the touch of his lips; it brushed by, scarcely stirring on my cheek, to fall almost roughly on the ripple of dark hair above my ear.

Then he bolted to the door and held it open for my headlong exit from the den.

To the sound of an explosive "*That's more like it!*" from Uncle Waters. "*You surely never—*" (Slam! from the door) I tore across the hall. I didn't pause for any more good nights in the drawing-room. I rushed upstairs to my bedroom.

Here I flung myself down into one of the rosy-chintz chairs by the open window and gasped while I tried to collect my whirling wits.

* * * *

What *had* happened? What was he—that young man—doing to *allow* anything to happen? His "*official*" *fiancée*? Was this what he meant by "*official*"—it wasn't what *I* meant, and I would let him know that. I was furious with him—His uncle's fault?—Yes! But he ought to have managed so that *That* wasn't thrust upon me like this.

I *was* angry!

Then I couldn't help laughing a little at the mad incongruity of it.

Kissed, by Still Waters!

What could he think I thought of it? What was *he* thinking about it all now, downstairs there with those other two horrible men? What was his Uncle Albert thinking? Chuckling and laughing, ho, ho! I expected. . . .

That ghastly moment !

That ghastly, *ghastly* moment ! . . .

Thank goodness that the Governor did at least end it as soon as was humanly possible. And, after all, that quick gesture of his hardly counts as a kiss. I've seen the love-scenes in private theatricals carried out just like that by bashful amateurs. A stage-kiss ; a sham one ; in fact, no kiss at all.

Well, that, anyhow, was decent of Still Waters. . . .

But *was* it ? Was he thinking of *my* feelings ? I don't believe he was.

I believe—at least, a month ago I might have believed—with the rest of the girls at the office, that that would be his only conception of kissing a girl. I can't believe that now—not of a brother of Theo's and Blanche's—not of a son of Mrs. Waters's ! His father, Blanche said, was so devoted to her . . . their boy would have inherited some sort of idea of the real thing ! Besides, a young man who's already surprised me by being able to sing like that, and to be keen on dancing, and to win swimming competitions, and to look, sometimes, quite *human* ! Oh, no !

It was *meant* for being decent.

He'd scarcely touched me—except just on the hair.

Then I felt furious again.

My hair—my pet vanity—the prettiest thing

about me ! Once Sydney Vandeleur begged me for a piece of it to keep—that piece with the ripple—as if I'd cut it ! If I had, it wouldn't have got kissed

Hateful, clumsy, blundering, or *something* young man ! He *needn't* have kissed me at all ! He *could* have got out of it—in spite of his detestable old uncle.

Couldn't he have seemed to think that I was too shy to let him in public, and allowed me to slip away ? Or couldn't he have followed me into the hall and shut the door and *pretended* ?

Or couldn't he have hatched up some joke on the spur of the moment and announced cheerfully—

“ Oh, we don't say our good nights in here, Uncle ; outside in the veranda is where we say good night ”—or something like that ?

Easily.

Then what did he mean by it ?

Was it that this excruciating evening, with its countless trials, had worn his patience absolutely through, and that he felt he must vent his fury on something besides Cariad ? Was that kiss a kind of “ let-fly ” at *me* ?

How frightfully unfair ! As if I'd done anything but rush into breaches and make the best of things for him ! Good gracious ! I shall tell him exactly what I think of it all to-morrow !

But the evening held one last trial for me before I was able to slip into that springy snow-drift of a bed and lie tossing, indignantly awake, for quite an hour after I'd heard the motor puff off, taking Major Montresor to catch his last train up to town.

This trial was heralded by a tap at my door.

Enter Blanche in her *débutante's* dinner-gown.

"How early you're going to bed, Nancy! We thought you were still with Billy, but Uncle Albert's taken him on at billiards—he says he's playing worse than anyone he's ever seen. Is anything the matter, dear?"

"Oh, no—nothing; why?"

"You look so flushed—I thought you might have a headache."

A headache—ah! valuable antique feminine excuse for everything! "Yes—perhaps I have, a little."

"Poor darling! Everybody *did* seem to be talking at once at dinner, and Uncle Albert *is* such a fog-horn, enough to go through anybody's head. Let me brush your hair for you, will you?"

I had to let her.

"It'll be better with all these pins and clips out," said Blanche, unfastening and shaking loose. "Goodness, what lots you've got! It's like yards and yards of black skein-silk. And *how* lovely and soft."

And here, in the looking-glass, I saw the girl's face, blonde and clear-featured as her brother's, pressed for a moment to the ripple of dark hair above my ear.

It must have looked something like that just now to those two other men in the den. . . .

Then I saw my own face turn scarlet.

Blanche Waters saw that too.

"Oh, sorry," she murmured, with a little "understanding" smile. "Mustn't I?"

She might just as well have *said*, "Mustn't anybody except Billy kiss you just there?"

—Which did, as my brother Jack would say, put the lid on it!

Well! to-morrow I am going to put my foot down, very firmly, on anything more of *this* sort!

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIRST HANDSHAKE

THIS morning I was just finishing dressing when I heard a blackbird's whistle, two or three times repeated, just outside my window.

It interrupted my meditations on a rather interesting subject.

Namely: What was my employer going to say to me to-day about that episode last night?

How—in what spirit, in what words, would he make his apology?

Of course I know that for the offence of having kissed a girl who is nothing to him there *is* no apology a man can make. The mere suggestion of apologizing for that is adding insult to injury. The only possible excuse is to say: "*I don't expect you to forgive me, but I couldn't help myself*"—allowing an unspoken—"and *I'd do it again if I had the chance*" to be interpreted by the tone in which it was spoken.

However, *that* was quite out of the question here, seeing that there had been no kiss of that sort in the affair. The offence, however,

was just as inexcusable ; more so. To have kissed me on the hair—why, even as I took up my brushes before the glass this morning I saw the reflection of another angry wave of scarlet in my face brought there by the memory which can't be just brushed away.

It might not have been so infuriating if it hadn't been the first time. . . .

For I'd never before allowed any man to attempt such a thing. I've always known that one ought to stick to what Lady Mary Wortley-Montague says in that little poem :

"He comes too near who comes to be denied!"

I remembered that last night, as I lay awake ; remembered quoting it to Cicely Harradine. She had laughed and turned rather pink —this was after some dance we'd both been to at the Slade—and had said, “Yes, Tots dear ; that is so sweet—and so awfully true, of course ; only—it *was* in the eighteenth century, dear, wasn’t it ? and isn’t it *rather* what you call ‘a Counsel of Perfection ? ’ ”

It oughtn’t to be so—it needn’t have been so for me, but now—that’s all been spoilt—and by *him* !

What can he say about it ?

“Nothing else for it—my uncle’s doing.”—Yes, but I’ve got all my answers for *that* excuse.

“I was goaded into it by having had such an

awful evening ; felt I must do something outrageous." Yes, but not *that* ! I had had an awful evening too ! And I hadn't wanted to kiss anybody !

" Hadn't time to think of anything else."

Nonsense ! A business man with his wits sharpened by daily interviews with other sharp-witted people for whose benefit he has to think out, even while he's speaking, excuses, schemes, promises, goodness knows what ! Oh, he'd have to say something more convincing than that to me !

Again I heard the whistle—a monotonous note for a blackbird's ! Then came a sharp tap at my opened, latticed, wistaria-garlanded casement. A pebble had been flung up against it.

This gave me quite a little jump ; it brought back old days at home ; when Sydney, staying in the house, had wanted to bring me out for a stroll before breakfast.

" Must be Theo," I said aloud to myself. But something told me it wasn't. I looked out. Yes. There on the gravel beneath, in a blue serge suit that seemed to make his sleek head shine quite golden in the morning sunshine, stood my employer, looking up.

Waiting for me to come out ? Throwing stones up to catch my attention ? Who taught him that ?

" Good morning," he said quietly. " Will you come down when you are ready ? "

I nodded as ungraciously as I could, and drew back at once. I was quite ready, but I stopped dead-still by the wardrobe glass for a long moment, letting him wait. Then I turned to the door.

Then I came back again.

I took the shadiest hat I've got out of its drawer and pulled it down firmly over my hair, stabbing it on with my swastika hatpin, my hand-wrought silver one that Sydney designed for me, my two mounted regimental buttons of father's, and my little pearl-headed one. I daresay my head did look all bristling with spikes, like the Statue of Liberty's. But if I'd had more pins I'd have stuck them *all* in ! And even if I do, like Blanche and Theo, usually go about hatless in the gardens, I was going to use all the "cover" I could to meet the Governor's apology, whatever it might be. For *now* he was going to have his work cut out for him ! And whatever he began to say about last night's brusque, snatched kiss, I wasn't going to help him out by one syllable. I could wait. Let him explain ; floundering about for words, probably, as he hasn't floundered yet ! Feeling most satisfactorily composed myself, I came down the stairs. One of the maids, in china-blue print, moved aside a dustpan for me to pass.

Then I saw something that ruffled me again.

In that dust-pan there was a handful of pink, crystallized rose-leaves and a couple of tiny silver

horseshoes—Theodora's “confetti !” It must have dropped out of the draping of my skirt as I rushed upstairs—was there no getting away from last night ?—and I know that there was something more than well-trained civility in that girl's smiling “Good morning, Miss Nancy !”

Why can't they say “Miss Trant” ? Do they consider it isn't worth while for so short a time, as they think ?—*Hateful* household !

I had only just unruffled myself again as I faced the Governor in the sunshine outside.

“Come in here, won't you ?” he said, holding open the little white gate under the rambler arch of the rose-garden.

It was just then a bouquet of warm, scented colour, shading down from the deepest damask of the bed of Jeune Amours, through the rosy, straggling Baroness von Ulks and the faintly-flushed Cuisses des Nymphes to the dead-white Frau Karl Druschkis—such a rose-garden, such an earthly paradise for a before-breakfast stroll —*alone* !

Side by side we paced slowly down to the end of the box-bordered path between the pink Maman Cochets (another echo of last night !) before another word was said.

Then he began. “I wanted to have this opportunity of saying something to you.”

His tone was conciliatory, quiet. The expression of his face was—well, not in the least

his mask of office-hours, nor the scowling barricade he put up at last night's dinner-table ; but guarded and absolutely non-committal.

So was mine, I hope.

I waited for him to go on.

"I may tell you," he went on, "that I've been regretting—"

Last night, I supposed ? A curious way of *putting it* !

—"regretting for some time that it was you I asked to take on this—this situation for me."

"Oh!"

We turned and walked back again.

"I mean," he added quietly, "that I regret having dragged a girl of your kind, more sensitive and spirited than I had imagined—"

What *had* he imagined, then ?

—"into this affair."

"Oh."

"I—I suppose I ought to have known better than to ask—you."

"Oh," I said, for the third time, and I meant to stop there. But somehow I couldn't help going on rather acidly, "And which of your other employees do you wish you had asked instead ? Miss Robinson ? "

(Who would have been provided with material for impersonations of the family Waters for the rest of her life.)

—"Or Miss Holt ? "

(*She*, I know, would have screamed aloud when he inflicted that extraordinary kiss upon her !)

" Miss Smith, of course, has her affections otherwise engaged——"

" Ah ? And so that would have been a barrier, would it ? Even to this kind of an affair ? " retorted the Governor, very quickly and looking hard at me.

I knew what he meant. He was thinking of the Major's clumsy bringing-up, yesterday, of the name of Sydney Vandeleur.

So I lifted my eyes, which had been idly studying the grey pattern of shadow flung by a trellised rose-arch upon my creamy skirt, and I looked the Governor firmly in the face as I said quietly :

" I imagine so."

Then *he* said, " Oh."

And then there was another pause.

Surely Mr. Waters could not break it by anything else, now, than by coming to the point—saying whatever it was he meant to say about his behaviour at the door of the den ? But nothing of the kind.

" You quite understand, then, that I am sorry —for bringing you into all this ? " he began again. " Right. Now, I suppose I ought to offer to release you from the arrangement."

" Yes ? " I looked up again quickly, hopefully.

"Only, you see, I can't," my employer concluded, slowly. "I can't do that. The—er—my—the reason which forced me into it is—still there."

"Oh."

Another turn. This time towards the pergola.

"Another thing," he went on—and this time I really did think I knew what was coming next. "About last night."

I didn't say, "Oh"—I simply waited for whatever apology he thought fit to make.

"Last night, in the drawing-room before dinner. I'm afraid I was rather rude."

"*Before* dinner?" I echoed, forgetting what could have happened then.

"Yes; when you were asking me about that place in Wales, Porth Cariad," he said. "I told you, rather off-handedly, I'm afraid, that there was 'a wooden woman' there."

"Oh, yes!"

"Well, there is. It's the figure-head of a ship, some vessel that was wrecked in the bay, years ago," explained the Governor quite simply. "They've put it up beyond the two cottages there, on the cliff. I ought to have explained that at the time."

Well! And wasn't there anything else he had to explain? With all these "Oh's" and pauses, he was a long, long time in coming to that unjustifiable kiss—and yet something convinced

me that his mind was full of it even while he mentioned these other things first.

"Besides that," he went on deliberately, "there's something I was thinking over last night, for quite a time before I went to sleep."

Ah! At last!

"I wanted to suggest——" he was saying, when, from behind the leafy screen of the pergola there came a booming cry of :

"Aha! Here they are! here they are! Might have known what they were at! Love among the roses, eh?"

And in another moment there hove into view the rotund, white-waistcoated form and the rosy John Bull face, smiling under the light grey, dented felt hat, of Uncle Albert Waters.

Beaming and rubbing his hands, he advanced upon us.

"Now, young people, young people! Breakfast's ready! Didn't hear the gong, eh? No, of course not. Something better to listen to, as I said. *I* heard you, Billy! I heard you whistling under her window half an hour ago! Something worth while being an early bird for now, what? But come along."

He slipped one arm into his nephew's, the other into mine, and wheeled us round towards the house.

"I told your mother I'd come out myself and fetch you in!"

Perfectly unconscious that if wishes could have killed he must have fallen down shrivelled to a cinder on the garden path, he rolled on happily between us towards the French windows of the dining-room, prattling robustiously all the way.

"Nothing comes up to that nine-o'clock-in-the-morning smell of bacon and coffee, does it? Smells far better than it tastes, they say! Which reminds me that I once heard a young lady, Nancy, my dear—only she was a cynical young person, not nearly so pretty—I heard her say that the best part of frizzling bacon was like Love—all in the anticipation! Never tasted as good as it promised to, so to speak! Of course you don't agree with her?"

"No, oh, *no!*!" I cried hastily, partly because I felt I must disagree with somebody, partly because I realized that the inevitable effect of this detestable old man upon his nephew was to strike him dumb when he ought to have spoken!

"Ah, quite right, quite right!" responded Uncle Albert, with an affectionate pressure of my arm in his. "*That's* the attitude! I don't believe in this modern plan of analysing everything down to nothing, do you?"

"*Hate* it," I said viciously—meaning that I hated having my arm squeezed by horrible relations-in-law never-to-be.

"I see you do! Good! My dear, I'm delighted to find that Billy's sweetheart sees eye

to eye with Billy's uncle on so many points. That's why I'm taking you out this morning—Oh, yes ! you too, my boy ! Not going to separate the turtle-doves !—going to take you both out if you can beg mother off from church. I'm going to motor you over—not a hundred miles away, and show you something—Aha ! Something that I fancy you will approve of as much as I do ! ”

“Heavens ! What will this new horror turn out to be ? ” thought I ; catching the same question in the Governor's eye as we entered the dining-room, where the family, including Cariad, was already at breakfast, and sat down to the coffee and bacon of old Mr. Waters' disgusting metaphor. We weren't long spared the answer to that question.

“Now, Mary ! I've just been telling our two young people here,” began Uncle Albert almost at once, “that they're going over in the car with me this fine morning to look at something I particularly want them to see. Now, I'll give you three guesses what it is—No, I won't—”

(Interrupting Theo, who had leapt up in her chair with a shriek of “Wedding presents ! That picture ! ”)

“—I want the pleasure of telling you myself. Picture ? No, child. Something to put the picture in—to *be* the picture in, ho, ho ! It's a house to let ! ”

"A *house*!" murmured Blanche, clasping her hands, and obviously seeing herself helping to arrange the flowers in it.

"A charming house, only fifteen miles from here. Just the place for Billy and his Nancy to settle down in when they get married," enlarged the elderly *enfant terrible*. "In fact, once they've seen it, they'll want to motor on and order that special licence at once, I shouldn't wonder!"

Mercy! I turned my eyes to Mrs. Waters, as if imploring her help to change the conversation; she only nodded and smiled and murmured: "Pretty blouse—I always like you in lacy white things, Nancy!"

There was no checking Uncle Albert; on he went:

"I was looking at the place only last week, and it's still going! There's a rose-garden, my dear, almost as prettily arranged as the one here that you were billing and cooing in just now. And a splendid vegetable garden for the more practical side of life. South aspect!—Very excellent fish-curry, Mary—Nice, airy bedrooms! *And*"—his voice took on an impressive rallentando—"Now, what do you think? A little—a little white wicket-gate at the top of the stairs! That's the crowning touch, eh?"

Yes. It was.

"That was what took *my* fancy, you know ! I immediately said to myself——"

At all costs, I felt, must Uncle Albert be kept from repeating what he had said to himself.

"Yes— But, Mr. Waters," I interrupted wildly, "I'm so afraid that that house wouldn't —couldn't do for *us* ! "

"What, my dear ! Why not ? If you only see it, you'll say as I did——"

"I'm sure it's perfectly lovely," I burst in ; "but the fact of the matter is that we—we have arranged to live in London"—"and in separate houses for ever," I might have added. I went on improvising rapidly. "You see, we shall have a town house for most of the year, and for the summer we're looking round for a sort of—of farmhouse, with two cottages by the sea, you know ! In—in Anglesey, I think. I am so fond of—of that part of the country, so—Those were our plans, aren't they ?" I concluded, with one reckless "Say so, *do* !" glance at the Governor.

"Yes—rather ! That's what *we'd* thought of !" he returned, with a glance back at me which betrayed something very like pure gratitude.

As well it might !

For again, just before I spoke, my employer had been at such an utter loss that—for the first time since I'd seen him, I felt positively *sorry* for him.

And I answered his glance with the tiniest nod of encouragement.

They were the first friendly signals that had ever passed between us.

* * * * *

“Look here. I must speak to you.”

This was my employer, hurriedly to me after breakfast, in the veranda. Now, as that deep, shady veranda is built all the way round the house, as every one of the windows gives on to it, and as all the windows are always wide open, I couldn’t help giving a look round it as much as to say, “Here?”

“Not here,” he muttered, still more hurriedly. “This seems to be the deuce of a house to talk in—never saw such a place. And there’s no time now. My uncle was going to take us along in the car——”

“*Must* we go?” I asked, softly and ruefully, with my back to one of the pillars.

“No. I’ve knocked that on the head—I’m going to take him off by myself to play golf. I said you’d really rather go to church with my mother and the girl.”

“Oh, thanks so much,” I said fervently. “I certainly would!”

“So I thought. Well, then, we shall be lunching at the Club House—or, anyhow, getting lunch somewhere out—not coming back here.”

I nearly said, "Thanks, so much!" once more.

I also nearly smiled to think that anyone else, catching sight of the two of us talking so quickly, so quietly, and so close together under the soft mauve fringe of wistaria-blossom that drooped from the glazed roof, might easily have imagined that our conspiracy was how to spend most of this glorious Sunday *together*, instead of *apart*!

"We might not even be back for tea," said the Governor.

"And when is——" I paused and turned my eyes towards the house, "*going?*"

"Six o'clock train back to town this evening," said the Governor, looking steadily at me.

A "Thank goodness!" remained unuttered on the tip of my tongue, as I felt obliged to say, "I hope he didn't think it odd of me not to want to see"—I brought it out with a jerk—"that house."

"Oh, no! He seemed rather bucked, really, to hear that—well, that we were so far on in our plans. Anglesey, you know, and so on," said the Governor, in an expressionless voice as I turned quickly away.

For I'd caught the heralding whiff of a cigar round the corner! Also, I wanted to be safely in my own room, getting ready for church, just at the time that those two men would be setting out for the links.

My employer took one step after me.

"This evening, then?—I mean, for what I was going to say to you."

Ah. That interrupted apology weighed on his mind.

"Very well," I said. "Good-bye."

And I drew a breath of relief to think of the whole blessed Day of Rest before me.

* * * * *

Even Church, however, wasn't without its slight reminder of the situation.

I was feeling rested, soothed, lulled—and, I am afraid, not strictly attentive—when my attention was caught, first by Theo's moist palm being thrust into mine, much as Cariad thrusts his nose, and then by a phrase in the voice of the officiating curate :

"I publish the banns of marriage between—"

Banns, of course! Of course they must needs publish banns on this particular Sunday and in this particular church! thought I, rather pettishly. Well, I supposed it wasn't really the Governor's fault! and that there *are* banns read every week! The next words I heard were :

"Also of Leonard Harris, bachelor—"

Ah! I knew his name; it was the young man from the Waters' butcher, who, as I had already been told, was to marry the prettiest of the maids at The Lawn, the one who was sweeping the stairs this morning.

—“and Ethel Mary Bell, spinster, both of this parish.”

Both absurdly happy, probably, in a “Smithie” kind of way. I wondered if “he” were red and greasy, like so many butchers? Whether he’d leave “her” at home while he went and sat all the evening in the “Spotted Dog”?

My young man—I suppose to some people the Governor *would* be my “young man”—isn’t that sort. Not that it need make the slightest difference to *me* if he were! I needn’t worry about the sort of husband he’ll make—to someone else.

“Also between——”

What a lot of engaged couples! Six, at least, were “called” to-day. And I wondered about each of those six engaged girls. . . . Which of them had bloomed out into what books call “*this strange new happiness that had come to her*” on HIS account, and which of them just wanted to be “engaged” for its own sake?

For supposing an engagement were stripped of all its glamour of importance? Yes, my dears! Take away the delight of discussing, with other girls, the possibilities of finest nain-sook and torchon. Take away the chance of growing positively left-handed from showing off “his” ring. Take away the joy of being, instead of an unattended wallflower at dances and

parties, always more or less of a guarded treasure. Take away that feeling of being at one and the same time much younger, much older and much better-looking. Take away the comforting conviction that *now* you needn't fret about what's to become of you when you grow *passée* and "long in the tooth," as Major Montresor unkindly calls various ex-favourites of his own. Take all those "extras" away—and what remains of your pride and joy in HIM alone? There's a sum for the "really" engaged girl. I can't help feeling I can guess how it would work out in—say, four cases out of six!

Perhaps I'm wrong. . . . Perhaps the whole six of them would still go on feeling that *their* unparalleled engagement had caused the sun to rise upon a new heaven and a brand-new earth. But it's odds, long odds, against any one of the six having an "affair" in the least like—*mine*.

And the curate went on reading out names.

"Also—"

"Between William Waters, bachelor, of this parish," breathed his younger sister in a gusty whisper, "and Nancy Monica Trant, spinster—of the parish of what, Nancy?"

"S-sh! Theo!" I whispered, still wondering about those banns. . . . Would it come to that? Would my employer feel himself obliged, before our twelve-months' contract was up, to let those banns be actually published?

"*If any of you know any just cause or impediment why these persons should not be joined together in Holy Matrimony,*" concluded the curate's voice, "*ye are to declare it.*"

What in the world *was* Mr. Waters going to "declare" about it to his family when we reached that point? What just cause or impediment (except the real ones) would he choose to "announce" as the bar to our getting married? Or would he, just as he did this morning at breakfast, leave all explanations to *me*, and reward me with a grateful look when I'd achieved them?

Well! . . .

Plenty of time before *that* happens. . . .

* * * *

To-night, though, there'd be that other explanation: his to me about that—really, under the circumstances it might be called that *outrage*! Even yet I hadn't made up my mind how I was to accept what he should say. The only thing left standing of all the many answers I'd considered and rejected was, "Well, it must never happen again, that's all!"

Even that doesn't sound right, somehow.

Perhaps something really clinching will occur to me later.

* * * *

It was almost at the end of this Day of Rest that the Governor, extra sunburnt and out-of-door-looking from the links, returned to find the women-folk of his household—to which I suppose I must count myself as belonging officially—sitting over that diminuendo of half-cups that marks the end of tea.

“Has your uncle gone, dear?”

“Yes; met some old crony of his and joined him for the journey home. If you tell me where his bag is I’ll get it sent down to the station to meet the six, Mother?”

“I’ll see to it now.”

She went out of the drawing-room—I *know* with the usual gentle intention of leaving the young people a minute to themselves after having been apart all day; but before Theodora and Blanche could follow her, the Governor, saying that he simply must change and get this dust off, disappeared himself.

He disappeared until supper-time.

For late Sunday supper they don’t dress at The Lawn. So I was still wearing my cream cloth costume with the white French blouse that Mrs. Waters likes when the hour came which is given over to my official *fiancé* and myself. I’m quite hardened to this now.

I supposed he would suggest the den. (I hate that den.) But he didn’t.

"Shall we go for a walk?" he said instead, "round the lawn?"

"Yes."

"Shall I fetch you a wrap to put over that frock?"

"Oh, no. It's perfectly warm, thanks."

"Oh. . . . Very well."

And so, at the dusk of the day, just as in the morning sunshine of it, I found myself pacing a garden path by his side, and wishing to goodness he'd get this over, out of the way.

He ought to be made to *grovel*, of course; that was as it should be.

But the longer he delayed mentioning that grotesque incident, the more it *loomed*!

It seemed to hang over my head like the shade of the trees that bordered the further edge of the lawn, which we had now reached. The great spread of turf was gleaming greyly in the dew. A bat, attracted by the whiteness of my gown, flickered out of the shade and wheeled above us.

"Well," began the Governor, "my uncle left all sorts of messages for you."

He would, of course. Carefully refraining from asking what they were, I said mildly, "Thank you."

"He's back in London by now."

"Yes."

"I suppose if he'd stayed on much longer,"

observed my employer, in a detached tone, “*you wouldn’t!*”

I said defensively, “I really *had* been thinking I might find myself obliged to go back to town at once!”

“After arranging to stay here for at least a fortnight,” he concluded quietly; “after having given notice at the office—”

“The office” was good! Just as if “the office” meant anything but himself, Mr. William Waters!

—“and having no people of your own to consider—what should you have said to mine?”

“I should have had to tell them that it was to—to attend a funeral!” I retorted, with a memory of Mrs. Skinner. “Or”—here I checked the suggestion of getting my hair singed and cut. I thought I’d better not begin by mentioning my hair! And I added recklessly—“or that I’d got to go to the dentist’s and have every one of my teeth out!”

“Rather than stay here in these circumstances. I see. Yes. I—Do you know, I have felt uncommonly like that myself,” admitted my employer. “That’s what I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. I thought it over last night, as I told you, and I’ve been thinking about it again to-day.”

I wondered what sort of a game of golf he’d played.

"It can't go on like this!" he said, suddenly stopping in our stroll and facing me in the deepening dusk under the copper-beech. "I can't stand it. It's got a—a bit too thick!" he concluded, quite schoolboyishly.

Then he began again, incoherently, indignantly, as if each word he said were a shell that held showers of bullets of other words.

"Theo's tomfoolery! Those dashed flowers! My uncle and his—his remarks!"

"I know!" I said fervently. He turned on me again, and added unexpectedly, "And you!"

"M-me?"

"Yes!" explosively. "You're the worst of all—and you do know it! Because I've let you in like this—"

"They'll hear you from the house—you really are like Theo sometimes."

—"Because I've let you in," sinking his voice and speaking once more calmly and deliberately, "for lots of unpleasantnesses which nobody could have—well, which *I* never anticipated—you do all in your power to pay me back!"

"All that—at dinner last night," I said virtuously, "was nothing to do with me. You can't say it was."

"No, I admit it was Theo. . . . But it was all part and parcel of the same impossible situation. Impossible! It can't go on like this."

"So you said before! But this morning you said you were unable to release me?"

"So I am. Which means that there's only one other thing to be done about it," said my employer.

I waited, wondering what on earth this might be.

Utterly unexpected was his next remark:

"Don't you think you could manage to be —*friends* with me?"

"*Friends?*" I repeated incredulously.

Then something of his meaning began to dawn upon me, and it was with a return of Manner B that I added: "I suppose you mean 'official' friends?"

"No, I don't," he said rather tartly. (That manner never has been lost on him.) "I mean, why can't we be really friends and call '*Pax*' — for at least the time that you're here? Don't you see how much better it would make it if we could face these awkwardnesses together, instead of my knowing every time that you are only waiting for the chance to rub it in and to get at me?"

This was all so foreign to his Near Oriental vocabulary that I nearly laughed. But not quite. For it was being borne in upon me still more clearly that I didn't care for this suggestion of his at all. He was actually asking for my help and co-operation, not in a sham rôle, but a *real* one? Well, I thought, what *cheek*!

"If you mean," I said, "that you want me to promise not to 'rag'—not to—to banter you again about all this; not to go on saying things that mean one thing for you and another to whoever else hears them, and all that——"

I was going to say that this I might promise; although I felt he was asking for a good deal—for his official *fiancée's* one safety-valve, in fact!

"No, no! That's not what I mean," he put in. "When I say 'friends,' I mean it. Genuine friends. On the terms we might be on if we weren't en—if we hadn't this 'engagement' between us."

"How *can* we be that?" said I emphatically.

"Why *can't* we?" he persisted.

"Why? Because I—I don't see how I could be expected to answer such a question!"

He didn't *say*, "You agreed to the other!" But I knew some men might. So I went on trying to explain to this specially obtuse one.

"Don't you see how much easier it is to pretend to be engaged or even—in love with a person, than to turn round and *like* them because you're asked to?"

"Is it?"

"But of *course* it is!" said I. "One *can* act being—engaged and all that. One *can't* force oneself into friendship, real liking." (Stupid, he was; it was just like his not seeing the difference between accepting furs—and a frock!)

"One simply can't make oneself *like*. That is asking too much. And I never bargained for it. It wasn't——"

—"In the arrangement," I nearly said.

I might just as well have said it! For:

"Damn—dash that infernal arrangement!" muttered my employer heatedly, crunching, in the absence of Cariad, the well-kept gravel beneath his heel. "Can't you forget that, leave that alone for the time being? It would be so much easier——"

"Yes! For you perhaps!" I retorted.
"But not easy for me; and it's impossible for me to feel like being 'friends' to order!"

He said nothing for a minute. Then he began again quietly. "You mean you dislike me?"

"I don't even know you well enough for really liking or disliking," I argued coldly. "And besides, what have we—you and I—in common, that we should expect to get on well together?"

I knew what a hopeless question *that* is to answer about almost any two persons!

He said rather helplessly, "Well, but hang it all! What have you in common with——"

Here I *felt*, suspended between us in the dusk like a Mahomet's coffin, the name of Sydney Vandeleur!

But the Governor changed his mind about uttering it.

He *said*:

"For instance, what can you have in common with a man like Montresor? You're twenty-one. He's what?—Fifty? Sixty? Yet you can talk—you can—— You seem to get on all right with him."

"Naturally!" I said.

The Governor said nothing.

He put up a hand and leaned against a bough of the copper-beech under which we were standing.

Well! It seemed going to be a long discussion.

I sat down on the garden bench a step or so away, and turned my head to look at the glimmering white trumpets of a tobacco-plant that grew behind the bench. The only form in which tobacco smells anything but poisonous! And there were such beds of it at home . . . in the evening it scented all the grounds. . . .

"Major Montresor, as he told you, knew me in my home, knew all my people," I went on slowly. "He knew all the places I went to before I had to drop out of everything that I cared for and had to slave for my own living in that detestable City of yours."

"You speak as if I owned the City—as if I were responsible for your having had to work there—for the whole thing! Is that fair? Must you go on making me stand for all that? Supposing it hadn't been there at all that you first met me, Nancy?"

For the first time the name slipped out from my official *fiancé* quite naturally.

"Don't you think," he went on, "that we might have managed to get on moderately well then?"

"How can I tell?" said I. I wanted to keep him on that strictly business footing. This other I didn't want. I knew it would take something from me, and give me nothing—nothing to stand up for myself with—in its place.

"Try to imagine," he persisted, "that I'd known you in your home, like that chap—what's-his-name—"

The name—Vandeleur—flickered between us once more like that bat in the air!

—"like Montresor. Imagine that you'd never been at the Near Oriental—never heard of the place. I'm sure I often wish I hadn't," the Governor's voice came ruefully out of the dusk. "Then, instead of this eternal sparring—"

"My only refuge," I thought, "and he's trying to turn me out of it!"

—"there might surely have been something distinctly resembling friendship between us?" he said.

I said obstinately, "Might there? I don't know."

He moved. There wasn't enough light to see his face. Only his collar made a white blur against the branch, and the broad slope of his

shoulders showed dark against the sky that had deepened from lilac to purple.

"But I know," he said quietly, "that you could—that you *could* be—"

He paused.

"Well?" I said, rather uncomfortably. "I could be what?"

"Rather a little brick to me if you chose," said the Governor.

I am sure it slipped out without his meaning it to. *He* would have been ready to go on arguing quite logically about "how much more sensible" et cetera. . . . How there was "absolutely no valid reason why it shouldn't" and so forth . . . for another hour!

He can't know how the key of a logical argument will fumble forever at the locked safe-door of a woman's mind that could just fly open to the cipher spelt "Appreciation."

—"Rather a little brick."

So he did think me capable of that?

I was glad of the dark under the copper-beech. For I didn't want my employer to see that his words had any sort of effect on me. Four words ought not, certainly, to be enough to threaten to bring one's flag down with a run . . . or even to flush one's cheeks with that sudden warmth—of surprise. I didn't mean to hesitate—

But there was a moment's silence before I

could think what to say. I was glad he was standing right away from me. . . .

Just at that, he came and sat down beside me on the garden-seat.

“Well ?” he said expectantly.

“M-m—very well,” I heard myself say with a little sigh.

“You mean that you will ?”—quickly.
“That it’s peace between us ?”

“Yes—” reluctantly, from me.

“And that, instead of remaining”—I heard him laugh a little—“a mere *fiancée*, you’ll be friends now—real chums ?”

“If you like,” I sighed again. “That *is* promotion, isn’t it ?” I said, not meaning to be altogether too polite to him.

“Nancy, I know I’m rotten in lots of ways,” he admitted frankly. “I daresay you think I’ve got a beast of a temper, don’t you ?”

“Well,” I said slowly, “you did kick Cariad, didn’t you ?”

“Little brute needs it ! He’s disgustingly spoilt. Everyone is who belongs to my mother.” . . .

“And you did make Theo cry !”

“Did her good !”

“It didn’t in the least ! She was just as bad again to-day !”

“Was she, by Jove ? Then I shall have to—”

“No, no, she wasn’t. I mean, *you* are !”

"Ah, but I'm—*we're* going to turn over a new leaf!" he said, laughing. "That's settled, isn't it? Good! This is going to be no end better, all round."

All very well for *him* to say so! I thought, as I got up and turned towards the dim, blue-white front of the house with the dark girdle of the veranda circling it, and the windows, now lighted up, set into it like a chain of long, rosy jewels.

He rose too.

"Well!" he said, straightening himself a head and shoulders above me. "Do we shake hands on that, Nancy?"

"I suppose so," said I.

What else was there to say or do?

I don't consider it's going to be "better all round." For me it will be ever so much more awkward—as well as something—yes!—something like a *climb-down*.

Still—

As he held out his hand I put my own into a particularly warm and hearty grip.

It was the very first time we'd shaken hands at all.

Last night a kiss on the hair!

To-night, a handshake! . . .

And, in spite of all I'd expected, he'd never once mentioned that kiss.

I suppose he won't now.

CHAPTER XX

FRIENDS

OFTEN, when I've imagined something was going to be so easy and delightful, it's turned out to involve every kind of difficulty and unpleasantness. Like earning my own living in the City. And then other things, which I've foreseen as such odious and constant worries, have proved to be not nearly so bad after all; in fact, quite amusing—that's like agreeing to be "friends—real chums" with my employer Mr. Waters.

He's really quite—I don't know how to put it—*different*.

I know he's trying to be "decent" to me, and yet not trying hard enough to make me feel it's my duty to "play up" and to be unnaturally sweet in return.

Instead, I am beginning to feel that I shall soon be able to like him genuinely, just as I like Blanche and Theo, though perhaps not quite as well as I like his mother, who seems more of a darling every day.

This morning after I came back from driving

to the station with the Governor, she called me, and I went into the little tiny room off the drawing-room, which is furnished only with one deep chair and her writing-table, but of which each wall is simply covered with framed photographs of her children at every stage.

She was sitting at the writing-table, with a pile of letters to answer.

"Sit in the big chair, Nancy. I won't keep you more than a minute," she said, turning to me, "but I wanted to speak to you. It's about our summer plans, dear."

"Oh, yes," I began. The fortnight which I'd arranged to spend at The Lawn—and which seems about three months now!—is up tomorrow. I was just going to remind her of this, when she said, "We all—not only Billy!—are so anxious that you shall stay on, Nancy. You will, won't you, if you haven't made other arrangements?"

"Oh! I've made none," I said, hesitating both in my official and unofficial capacities. I didn't *mind* staying on, now. Still—ought I to do it?

"We have only a week or so," said Mrs. Waters, "before we go away to the sea. That is, the girls and I are off on Saturday week to Anglesey."

"To Porth Cariad?" I said. "Isn't that the place—he told me about?"

"Yes ; Billy's so fond of it ! It's just a tiny place with a station and a post-office and a handful of cottages. We take the two cottages nearest the sea, and let just the woman and her daughter 'do' for us. He likes that so much better than going to a 'resort' with hotels and esplanades and things."

"Of course !"

Mrs. Waters gave me a pleased, girlish smile.

"Then, if you do too, you'll come, won't you ? He didn't seem sure whether"—she laughed a little—"whether it mightn't bore you rather ; but he made me promise to ask you. Will you come ?"

"I should like it very much," I said sincerely, for, since this revised version of my relations with Mr. Waters, there's an end of any more complications for the present. It has been worth while sinking the small satisfactions of being "cattish" and making two-edged remarks to my employer. I seem, now, to have all the advantages of being engaged to a quite friendly and easy-to-get-on-with young man, without the horrible disadvantage of feeling it's a permanency. Yes ; I do like having the freedom of a man's conversation and society without *arrière pensée*. And it seems to me that the only way to enjoy them is by being officially—that is, *nominally*, engaged to the man ! In any other sort of acquaintanceship

there looms the possibility of the "Real" engagement. All the time that the girl and the man are having what might be a jolly and unembarrassed conversation about really interesting things—not Love and nonsense—that possibility is being conjugated between them by some horrid form of Conscience or Self-consciousness. Something like this :

"*I might fall in love.*"

"*Thou mightest fall in love.*"

"*She might think I was falling in love.*"

"*He might imagine I wanted him to fall in love.*"

"*We might both fall in love.*"

"*You might tease us about being in love.*"

"*They might say we were actually engaged !*"

All this we—Mr. Waters and I—are spared. The feeling of it, which is there like a brick wall between almost every unattached young man and young woman, I know ; I've felt it there between Sydney and myself, long, long before I knew he admired me.

And this same wall—well, it's not so much that it's never been built, or even that it's been pulled down, as that it's not *between* Mr. Waters and me, just because we're sitting on the top of it and talking all the more comfortably for having climbed it together !

Consequently, I really was pleased to accept Mrs. Waters' invitation. And when she said

further, "Billy won't be able to join us for a fortnight, I'm afraid. Will you go back, dear, to this friend of yours you live with in London, and come on later? Or—of course you know we should love it!—could you come with Blanche and Theo and me?" I said, "Do let me come with you and the girls."

"That's right," said the Governor's mother. "Then I shall write to Mrs. Roberts at the cottages, and tell her to have the extra bedroom in *my* cottage ready for you."

"And I will write to Cicely Harradine—that's the girl I live with," said I. "And I ought to go up one day this week to the flat, and see her and collect a few things."

"Go up on Saturday, dear," suggested the Governor's mother. "Then Billy could motor you up; he would like that so much."

She has so many plans of this kind for me, fostered by this delusion that her son is always on the look-out for a chance to be alone with me.

Of course it's not quite the same kind of delusion now that it was a week ago.

The Governor's "Good!" when he heard that I was going to spend the summer holidays with them at that curiously-named place in Anglesey was quite as sincere in its way, I do believe, as Theo's "Joy! Oh, it will be twice as lovely as usual with Nancy there to show

everything to ! ” He wasn’t the least bored, either, when Mrs. Waters put forward the plan of his motoring me up to town.

“ Rather ! A good idea,” he said briskly. “ What about starting earlier after lunch, and doing a matinée this afternoon ? You’ve never been to the theatre with me yet, Nancy, and—we talked about that one day.”

“ So we did,” said I demurely, remembering that grisly occasion at the Carlton.

“ Well, would you care about it ? ”

“ I should ! Why ! I haven’t been to the theatre for ages. I haven’t seen anything ; not even *Milestones* ! ”

“ Care for that ? ”

“ Anything, so long as it’s a play ! ”

“ Then I’ll ’phone up now for seats.”

And as he spoke through the telephone that is fixed up in the den, I had almost a start at what seemed to me the strangeness of my employer’s voice. Yet that curt, metallic “ *Hullo !* ” used to be familiar enough to me—the only tone of his voice, indeed, that I’d ever heard !

* * * *

Passing the long waiting queue at the gallery entrance to the Royalty this afternoon, I glanced idly towards all those people who had stood for over an hour, probably, to get a shilling seat ;

the playgoers to whom I myself belonged a couple of months ago. Yet I never felt I'd belonged to them. . . . I suppose no woman, from a factory-hand to a viscountess, feels that she really "belongs" to any but the life of luxury. I don't believe men feel that as strongly—and yet it's they who are supposed to be the more finished and civilized sex. I must ask Mr. Waters, now that I know him well enough, what he thinks about this?

I was just wondering, when, out of that mosaic of black and coloured pattern formed by the crowd, there turned with one movement three dabs of colour, three cheap, effective little hats; and three girlish faces, alight with amusement and recognition, were lifted towards us.

They nodded and smiled; and I, leaning forward out of the car, was just in time to wave my hand to them.

"Friends of yours?" said my employer, glancing back as he raised his hat!

"Why, yes! Didn't you know them?"

"No! Why should I?"

"Because you see them every day," I laughed. "They were Miss Robinson, Miss Holt and Miss Smith from your office."

"No? By Jove," said Mr. Waters, rather blankly. Which surprised me rather, as I remembered his care that "the other typists

should know for a fact " with whom I was going out, that first time of all.

I was conscious, though I couldn't see where they sat in the gallery, that their three pairs of eyes must be glued to us in our front-row stalls. Nothing could have been more conventional than our appearance—we were absolutely the model of a prosperous young engaged couple up from the suburbs ; I, prettily dressed, with the inevitable box of chocolates on my lap ; he, good tempered and easy of manner, paying me all the customary attentions of programme, helping me off with my coat, seeing that I had opera-glasses, the best seat, and so on, and yet—apart from the "official engagement" side of it, how *really* unconventional was our relation !

So much more satisfactory under the circumstances than a real engagement ! Or that pie-bald thing, an understanding ! Or that other form of platonic friendship which either the girl or the man is always hoping, or fearing, may turn into something else !

The curtain went up to the soft strains of a tune which I, who have had to play accompaniments to so many songs, didn't know. . . . But beside us and behind us there were old ladies who murmured, " Ah ! ' *She wore a Wreath of Roses.*' "

The play began, and I forgot everything else or a time.

In the first interval we amused ourselves by looking at the audience. They were nearly all elderly ladies ! As the Governor remarked, "Nancy ! Yours and mine are the only heads for three rows of seats that aren't grey-haired or covered with bonnets ! "

"They've come to catch echoes of their past," I murmured flippantly as those tunes from the *Mikado* sent the curtain up on Act II.

That finished my flippancy for me.

In what seemed like hours afterwards I heard Mr. Waters' voice, cool and detached, saying something about good acting and soothing syrup and the most sentimental public in the world, then breaking off suddenly, anxiously to exclaim, "What is it, Nancy ? Aren't you well ? "

"Of c-course I am ! I'm only enjoying myself !" I sobbed quietly ; tears dripping down on to the pleated frill of my afternoon blouse. "I think it's p-perfectly lovely !" And I dabbed my face with the powder-puff swathed in my handkerchief.

"Rum idea of enjoyment," said the Governor doubtfully.

"Not a bit rum," I argued, having steadied myself again. "You don't know much about girls—they're mostly like that—ask any of them—ask any of the other typists in your office ! "

"I suppose I've never looked upon those as 'girls,'" said he. "They're—machines !

machines that eat cherries all day long and chuck the stones all over the floor. Such inefficient ones, too ; they——Why d'you laugh, Nancy ! I say, you know quite well I don't mean——”

“Ssh !” came indignantly from under the bonnet—trimmed with squashed heliotropes and doddering jet beads—on the other side of him, as the band struck up the rollicking two-step that heralds the twentieth-century act.

I didn't cry any more, though.

I believe I was actually less taken up with what was on the stage than with the oddness of my having been behind two sets of scenes myself ; with those girls who “couldn't possibly look upon Still Waters as ‘a man,’ exactly” and then with this man who never really considered typists as “girls.” When had he left off considering me as just a typist ? How soon before that evening when we became friends ?

Once more I felt grateful to that evening's compact, as I followed the tall figure with that slight dip from the broad shoulders in to the waist—that line so painfully cultivated by Major Montresor !—and let it make a path for me out of the theatre and to the waiting car.

I believe I've always really hated going about London alone, or with just another girl !



"Now, then ! Rumpelmayer's, or the Piccadilly, or where, for tea, Nancy, before I take you on to your friend's ? "

"I meant to have tea with her," I explained. "I was going on in the bus, and getting down to Sevenoaks afterwards by the dinner-train ; saying good-bye to you here."

"Oh, were you ! Why not take me along too ? " he suggested, looking down at me.

Well ! Why shouldn't he realize in what sort of places these machines called working-girls live ? He'd heard about the lawns and gardens, and so forth, of my old home. Let him see the change I'd had before—well, before that first interview in his office. Then there was Cicely. Yes, when I left her she was still rather "difficult" about my engagement—rather given to unspoken hopes that I wasn't doing it for the money. Let her see that my (official) *fiancé* was quite a human sort of young man—the sort that some girls really might get engaged to without a thought of his income !

"My chum is a very pretty girl," said I ; "*she's* worth looking at——"

"Fair ? "

"No, glorious red hair."

"Well, take me along and let me look at it !" he urged boyishly ; and presently we were speeding along down the Embankment towards Marconi Mansions.

I had my latch-key in my vanity-bag. I opened the door at the top of the many stone steps and led the way into the passage, which seemed about as light and wide as a good-sized drainpipe after that airy, tiled vestibule at The Lawn. Meaning to take Cicely by surprise, I quietly walked into our small front sitting-room.

But it was Cicely who took me by surprise.

She had, already, a visitor for tea.

Thick cigarette-smoke made a blue haze above the jumble of odd bits of furniture which we'd picked up second-hand in the Old King's Road, above the tea-table with its Persian Rose pottery, its plate of Chelsea buns and its green dish of cherries—I hoped there weren't many stones on the floor!—a haze that half obscured Cicely's bright head and the figure that reclined, opposite to her, in our comfiest basket-chair. I saw by the unusual garments of it that it must be—yes! Sydney Vandeleur!

Really, I don't know which of the four of us was least pleased to see the others, while I introduced Mr. Waters to Cicely and said gaily to the men, "I think you've met before" . . . and forced myself to dissipate the odious pause that followed the insincerely civil greetings by plunging into some sort of conversation.

It was worst for me, I think. I was so utterly taken aback—first, by finding Sydney there at

all, and then by wondering what on earth the Governor would think of his being there—and in those clothes !

For Sydney's latest idea for not being slavishly got-up like every other miserably conventional tailor's dummy was, apparently, to have his “things” more or less a copy, but an *édition de luxe*, of a French fisher-boy's *vareuse*-blouse and skirt-like trousers ; those brown corduroys were of corduroy-velvet at goodness knows what a yard, cut by some master-hand in Savile Row ; the very bagginess at the ankles, above the leaf-brown silk socks, had been carefully studied. And the Governor !—who'd once said :

“ *After all, what's unusual in dress is wrong, nine times out of ten. Eight times, it's also hideous.*”

He must be positively flabbergasted at this spectacle ! I'm more accustomed to those ideas ; but even I found it a relief to turn my eyes upon his stereotyped grey suit after that fell and deadly “ *effectiveness* ” of Sydney's. . . .

Posing in his dress like that ! Posing, even more shamelessly, in his manner !

For wouldn't you have thought that anyone who'd been refused by a girl and who then came unexpectedly face to face with that girl and the person for whom he imagines she's jilted him—wouldn't you suppose that he would

at least behave like a man? Take it without flinching, even if it were fairly unpleasant, and carry it off as if nothing particular had happened? I shall never think the same of Sydney again for not doing that.

Perhaps it served me right for the rather spiteful note I wrote to him just before I went off to The Lawn, but— Need he have committed the solecism of calling me, when I've never been anything but "Monica" to him, "*Miss Trant*" in italics? It was trying! So was the pathetic look which he saw fit to call up into his spanielly brown eyes as he glanced from me to Mr. Waters. (Mask well down there, so I couldn't guess what *he* made of this velvet-and-Vandyke apparition.) And the worm-in-the-bud expression which Sydney let steal over the whole of his dreamy, Cavalier's face as he turned it, in a way that all but said "Ah! You understand what I suffer!" to Cicely—

Cicely, too! *Cicely*, who's shared ups and downs with me for the last two years! Even she must needs forsake me, making matters worse by creating a general atmosphere of blight even while she was bringing in two more leadless-glaze cups and plates, and making fresh tea, and by giving an accurate though unspoken impression of what she "understood."

"Yes! I am the looker-on at this game. I see it all! The sensitive, artistic soul—"

(This is what she thinks of Sydney.)

—“torn by the sight of this hopelessly stodgy, commonplace young man—”

(I know that this is how she sums up my friend Mr. Waters.)

—“being preferred to himself! Ah, Love is blind!”

(Meaning me.)

“And people never seem to recognize the right man until it’s too late.”

(Deluded little donkey!)

We had tea. What a meal!

“You do take sugar in it, don’t you, Tots?” plaintively from Cicely, with a side-effect of, “She’s so deplorably altered in everything else, I don’t know what any of her tastes may be now!”

“Does Mr. Waters take it?” (To *me*!)

“Not any, thanks,” from the Governor.

“Only milk.”

Cicely’s glance commented silently, “Ah! Incompatibility latent here! An unhappy marriage!”

Why, why hadn’t I said I’d like to go to Rumpelmayer’s, or Lyons’—or Lockhart’s? Anything rather than this funereal feast, with Sydney Vandeleur as the skeleton thereat! Even if he’d remained a voiceless skeleton! But, cheered by all the subtle encouragement and moral support from his pretty hostess—I

must say Cicely was looking prettier than ever!—Sydney began to recover a little, relaxed his first pose of open broken-heartedness, and proceeded to *talk*.

Nobody else did. Mr. Waters looked as if nothing was going to force his lips asunder again. I didn't want to say anything. Cicely was quite happy to listen. And Sydney held forth.

He began with—"Have you been to—" and "Haven't you seen—" various picture-galleries and pieces of an "advanced" type.

"What! Not seen '*The Keening of Deidre*,' even? But why not?" he protested to me, lolling back in that chair as if he didn't possess a spine. "Oh, it's such a wonderful thing; so subtle and so brutal at the same time. And one's sure of seeing everyone one wants to see, in the pit; a positive At Home of them. Better than the dear old palmy days of the Sicilians. I have been three times. The whole effect is so—so sculptured! You would love it! Oh, you must take her"—this to my official *fiancé*, who sat silent and non-committal and very bolt-upright. "You really must not miss it. It is coming off next week."

"I'm going away next week," said I.

"Oh, yes? To the country?"

"To Wales."

"Ah, Wales! It used to be so wild and

charming and remote—almost as good as those perfectly untrodden tracts we still get in the West of Ireland. But it's frightfully overdone now," complained Sydney. "One doesn't know if it's the fault of Lloyd George, or the picture postcards, or that appalling little railway up Snowdon, but Wales has become so *obvious*. When I'm going over to Ballycool, do you know, I have to read all the way in the train between Chester and Holyhead, in terror lest I should inadvertently catch sight of any of the 'scenery.' I assure you"—to Cicely—"that when you get that Snowdon Range, cut out in purple cardboard jig-saws against what the dear tourists call 'a glorious sunset' it's almost exactly like a landscape in the Academy!"

"How *perfectly* dreadful!" sympathized Cicely—little humbug! who, only last year, used to mark her favourite pictures in the Academy Catalogue. I do hate a girl's tastes to be mere echoes of the man she's with!

"And those ruined castles; they're really almost too priceless to be true," enlarged Sydney. "Turrets like this"—he zig-zagged with a finger in the air, while a gold curb bracelet chinked at his slim wrist—"reflected, wherever possible, in water. Terrible! I mean, you simply *have* to laugh! You feel the landscape transforming itself into wings and a drop-scene before your eyes! And the 'Elephant

Mountain' that they insist on pointing out to you, because it really *is* so like an elephant's back ! (Such an attraction !). And then those *meaty* pink clouds that they always contrive to get so symmetrically posed *just* behind the summit of Snowdon ! Snowdon itself is so hopelessly banal that it only just falls short of perfection. Excruciating ! Cader Idris, now, is a little better," he went on kindly. "It is still possible to introduce Cader to one's friends. Cader, with that quaint lake they have there, remains quite an attractive mountain, I think"—turning to Mr. Waters, who still looked as if *he* couldn't think of anything to say to this person who patted the Welsh mountains, so to speak, on the head.

"We aren't going to be among the mountains," he announced briefly. "My people generally settle for six weeks or so in Anglesey."

"Not really ? How amusing—I mean, it's really possible to 'settle' there ?" said Sydney Vandeleur, lifting his dark Vandyke beard from his tie—heavens, what a tie ! I'd only just noticed that. "One had always looked upon Anglesey as a sort of straight line leading to the North Wall."

"H'm," said the Governor, who, having checked a "Can-such-things-be ?" start, was obviously trying to keep his eyes off that tie of Sydney's : a bunch of amber silk, patterned

with blatant little splashes of scarlet, black, magenta, emerald-green. . . . Futurist, I presume. How could I ever, ever have dreamt that life, even in Ballycool Castle, could have been tolerable with a man who wore ties like that? I should have left him in a week. No! I'm sure I should never have been there to leave him. I couldn't. . . .

Sydney lighted another cigarette, and the conversation languished. *Nobody* spoke.

In the middle of this sickening sag to the talk I had an inspiration!

I thought, since both these young men sing and one of them composes, that it would be at this juncture a bright thought to introduce the subject of music.

Why did I do it?

It was distinctly what Jack calls "a wash-out." For Sydney Vandeleur at once switched off on to Eleventh Century folk-songs. And Mr. Waters, asked if he didn't think they were too delicious, was "afraid the Eleventh Century was out of his groove."

And then Sydney hummed several only slightly more modern Celtic dirges—one about "The Sweet Flowers, all gone to Decay!"

And Mr. Waters said he preferred his flowers *fresh*; adding bluntly that he loathed all those miserable minor wails himself, and quite agreed with that law which Queen Elizabeth passed for

the Irish bards of her time, sentencing them to death if they composed songs on any subject whatsoever except in praise of the Queen's most Excellent Majesty.

That brought back some of Sydney's first pose. With a pained little smile he turned to me, then, putting on just the expression of the bereaved collie in Landseer's "Shepherd's Chief Mourner," he asked me if I *happened* to have kept the MS. of that little thing he'd written for me to that sonnet—"Kissing her Hair, I sat against her Feet."

I felt myself flushing up to the roots of my own wretched hair that he'd always so praised . . . there was something about kissing of hair which *he* knew nothing of, and that I was only too thankful to let die a natural death. . . . Rather shortly, I answered, "Oh, that song—yes; it's tucked away in some drawer or other here, I believe."

"If it wouldn't be troubling you too much, Miss Trant, to lend it to me again? It was my only copy," suggested Sydney softly (*con molto espressione*).

"Of course," said I. "I'll find it for you now. Cicely, you might come into my room and help me to hunt."

Cicely followed me, leaving those two men to entertain each other. How they proceeded to do so I suppose I shall never know!

"Well, Cis, how are you getting on?" I asked her, when the door was closed between us and them. "Foot's all right, I see, and you said you'd gone back to work?"

"Yes, but not at Chériquette's, you know; I'm working opposite in Bond Street; Madame Lamaire's. Mr. Vandeleur got me an introduction from his married sister, who knows her; and I'm getting a better salary, and such a much better time, there. He has been so awfully kind, Tots!"

"Has he? Have you—been seeing a good deal of him, then?"

"He's been here several times, but"—reproachfully—"only to talk about you!"

"Good of him," I said.

Cicely looked more reproach. "Well, he says you've taken all the colour out of his life and left '*gold tarnished and the grey above the green.*'"

"Drat him! And his colours!" I quoted Mrs. Skinner vulgarly and vindictively. "He'd plenty of them left in his tie, anyhow."

"I am afraid," said Cecily aloofly and with a pointed comparison in her face, "that you've scarcely *realized* Mr. Vandeleur."

"Haven't I? Well, the sort of man who, when he's turned down by one girl, must needs rush and pour it all out into the shell-like ear of the next——" But I broke off here.

What I suddenly did realize was that, for next to no reason, I was on the brink of squabbling ridiculously with my chum.

So I hastily changed the subject to rent-money and the length of time I should probably be away, caught up Sydney's ever-to-be-hated song, reassured Cicely that I was not going to be married until after the summer—*long* after! and told her I was glad she was getting on so well.

"Get Mr. Vandeleur, if he wants cheering up, to take you to '*The Keening of Deidre*,'" said I. "Good-bye!"

* * * *

It threatened to be a silent motor-drive back to Sevenoaks.

Again I felt that I should have to be the one to take the plunge into conversation.

"Well?" I said. "Didn't you think Miss Harradine a very pretty girl?"

"Beautiful hair," said Mr. Waters, "hasn't she?"

"Oh, lovely."

Silence.

I saw that Mr. Waters hadn't realized what I suspected: namely, that Sydney was beginning to find my chum quite sufficiently "lovely" as a girl, not merely as a confidante for his sorrows about "another," who was, as he imagined,

"another's." But I was longing to hear some comment on Sydney.

I should have been left longing, I suppose, if I hadn't said straight out, "What *did* you think of Mr. Vandeleur?"

"Oh, come! What a question! How can one tell, after seeing a man for half an hour? He seemed—clever, and all that," fenced my companion. "Of course he's not the sort of man *I* get thrown much with in that sordid, detestable City of mine, as you call it. What does he do?"

"He doesn't have to 'do' anything."

"Rather lucky for him," remarked Mr. Waters, in a tone I didn't fathom.

I said, "But he does draw and design—and he writes dramatic criticisms—and he composes."

"Gifted sort of chap," said Mr. Waters smoothly. "I suppose——"

And then stopped.

"You suppose what?" I urged. "No, do tell me," as he looked obstinately ahead and shut his lips into that line. "You *must*, Billy!" Then I found myself laughing and colouring a little with surprise. For the first time I'd used that absurd name in speaking directly to him.

He turned to me, smiling once more in quite a friendly way. But it was not to answer my question. It was to ask another.

"Nancy, you know I shall expect you to

write to me? When you're at Porth Cariad with my mother and the girls, I mean. . . . It'll look funny if you don't."

"Oh, of course. For the look of the thing," said I, "I'll write."

"Sorry to trouble you. You can put a blank sheet into the envelope, you know, if you like."

"I hadn't thought of that!" I laughed, glad to be once again on comfortable terms of chatty friendship. "But—so I can."

"Well, as long as you don't forget to send *something*," said Billy Waters.

* * * *

He reminded me of this once again, on Euston platform. For we—his mother, his sisters, his official *fiancée* and the little dog—left London at eleven o'clock on the following Saturday morning.

That evening we were all among the sand-slopes and the gorse and the soft calling of the waves at Porth Cariad.

CHAPTER XXI

THE FIRST LETTERS

“**H**ULLO, Robert Roberts ! Any letters for us ? ” sang out Theo.

She had darted out of the cottage, hatless, as usual, her nose already peeling with sunburn and her long bare legs covered with midge-bites and sea-holly scratches down to her white sand-shoes, to waylay our postman ; he’s the son of Mrs. Roberts, our landlady, a young Welsh giant who wears that uniform coat for just that five minutes daily which it takes him to deliver the mails at Porth Cariad.

“ Yes, mam ! ” he announced. “ Picture poss-card for you—I wonder shall I have it, mam, when you read it ? Blodwen and me is making a co-leckshon of those. Letter for your mother ; letter an’ *big* parsal for the strange young lady.”

I—who have not been seen in the place before this year—am the strange young lady.

“ Here you are,” said Theo, bringing the mail into the kitchen-sitting-room where we’d just finished breakfast ; a room that boasts three

grandfather clocks and five pairs of china dogs and a dresser crowded with blue-and-white plates. "The letter and the 'parsal' for Nancy are both from the Adored One!"

Meaning her brother.

"And I suppose you'll now have to fly off somewhere to read your love-letter all by yourself."

"Of course I must," I laughed.

For it's rather amusing in the face of all this to think that, except for one sentimental scrap from Sydney, I've never had a love-letter to read in all my life!

This duty-document of my official *fiancé's* I've taken out on to the sand-hills; there's a dip under the crest of one of them where I can curl up in comfort out of the wind, facing the view across the bay, with that pale lilac silhouette of the Carnarvonshire hills across the water.

How funny it seems to unfold a letter bearing the familiar heading of the Near Oriental Shipping Company's offices! But this one, actually, is not type-written, and signed by a "William Waters, per pro.," and a scrawled "A. A." of Mr. Alexander's.

William Waters has written in his own hand; not a particularly good one, either. Several sheets of it? Was it such an unusually slack day at the office, then?

"July —, 1913.

"MY DEAR NANCY,

"I was glad to hear *from my mother*"

(I don't see why he should underline the three last words; *I* shouldn't be likely to write first.)

"that you'd arrived safely and were comfortably settled into the cottages. I wonder what you think of Porth Cariad. I do hope you won't be bored to extinction in such a quiet spot; but you were warned, weren't you, not to expect esplanades and pier-concerts and shops and things? Do you think you can manage to make yourself at all happy without them?

"How do you like the bathing in that little bay next to the cottages? Can you swim? If not, you will have to learn. I will teach you.

"I am pretty keen on getting down myself, I can tell you. Town, in this heat, is the abomination of desolation; and smelly. So is the office. You've never been here in July. It's awful. I'll let you know later when I shall be coming; time of train, etc.

"You were missed at The Lawn last night. I took a man who lives near to share my solitary meal there, and to have a game of billiards afterwards. He wanted me to try over 'Ford of Kabul River' for him;

I can't accompany myself, though, and he made an awful hash of it. I wished we'd dined in town and gone to a show.

"When I go out to lunch I shall call at Fuller's and order them to send you on—for the look of the thing—a box of chocolates. I hope they have one with a picture of forget-me-nots or something of the sort on the lid,"

(Yes ; they had. White satin, with the sprays of flowers embroidered in pale blue silk.)

"as Theo notices everything. Don't let her bag all the sweets, though."

(Here the writing gets more scrawly and hurried.)

"Have just got in from lunch, which I had with my uncle. He was full of talk ; you can imagine it ! "

(I can.)

"I also saw two other men whom I'd got to meet, and as a result of this, I think I've managed to get through the business that was keeping me. So I shall be down at the end of the week after all ; cheers for some fresh air and a dip ! Please be very glad to see me, will you ? as Theo—but I put that before.

"Just before I went out to lunch a very rum thing happened: at least, I thought it was rum until I found out what it was. I was opening the door of my room when I heard, in the passage, *your voice*, Nancy! Yes, your voice, with that little dare-devil tone you put on sometimes, saying these extraordinary words: '*I think it's to the Savoy that I'm going out with Mr. Waters to-day!*'

"I couldn't think what on earth was the meaning of it, with you miles away in Anglesey."

(But already I smiled, seeing what was coming!)

"I wondered what could have brought you back, or if I'd got an hallucination—can you hear hallucinations?—and I bolted out into the passage, nearly knocking over two of the typists who were coming down it.

"Miss Smith (that's the one whose affections are otherwise engaged, isn't it?) fled like a hare; but that tall, dark Miss Robinson stood her ground, only moving aside a little for me to pass. I stopped and asked her straight out, 'Was it you who were speaking a moment ago?'

"She said 'Yes'—all meekness at once. 'Mimicking hussy' I thought—for it really

had been exactly the way I've heard you speak, you know, sometimes. It was all I could do to keep from laughing outright, but I just said 'Well, I am writing to Miss Trant to-day; can I give her any message from you?'

"And she said (in that 'mim' voice, which I'm blest if I shall ever feel able to believe in again!) 'Will you please give her my love, Mr. Waters?'

"So with love from Miss Robinson, I remain,

"Your

"BILLY."

(What's this? "Your" Billy? It can't be. Oh, no. It's his disgraceful handwriting. It's the "r" being scrawled into the "s" like that. "Yours, Billy," is how it really reads. How stupid of me not to see that at once! Then there's a bit across the top.)

"Six-forty train Porth Cariad on Saturday. You might write and tell me how you do like the place; and you might answer at once, even if it's only for the girls to take it to the post."

So, for the benefit of Blanche and Theo, I will write at once; I'll do it out here, in pencil on my pad, as I've so often taken down his own

letters. (One of these days I shall tell him how I loathed it, and how utterly impossible his dictation was !)

“ Porth Cariad.

“ July —, 1913.

“ DEAR SIR,

“ Your favour of yesterday’s date to hand, for which we thank you.”

(There ! I wonder how he’ll like that. Will he think that it goes on all through ?)

“ The lovely sweets really were appreciated ; but I didn’t let Theo bag them all, nor take the pale-blue satin tie-up to make a bow for Cariad, which was what she wanted to do. So then she said of course Nancy would want to keep that ribbon to tie round all your letters. She does notice everything, doesn’t she ?

“ As for how I like this place, I simply love it, and the cottages—I’m in the bigger one with your mother, and Theo and Blanche are together in the other until you come—and I love the sand-hills with the sea-holly and little prickly brambly roses and tiny purple pansies growing all over them,”

(I might slip a pansy from this place that he’s fond of into the envelope ? No, I mightn’t. There’s no Theo to “ notice ” at his end.)

"and the cloud shadows on those hills opposite, and Mrs. Roberts, with her sack-cloth cooking-apron and her clogs and the boy's cap she wears ; and Blodwen, even if all the English they know does always seem to be all about you ! And I should hate a pier-concert if there was one. There's everything here to make me quite happy. Since this very hot weather's come, the bathing is delicious. I learned to swim when I was a little girl, thank you."

(So he needn't think he can teach me anything.)

"How was Mr. Albert Waters ? Still chuckling and laughing 'ho, ho !' I expect.

"I laughed at your being taken in like that by Miss Robinson. Yesterday morning I was almost taken in, by something that was like you : a sharp tap against my bedroom window that might have been a stone thrown up. But it was only a fat, speckly thrush cracking a snail ; there are always lots of them crawling out of that southern-wood bush by the door.

"Mrs. Roberts asks me to tell you,"

(What she *said*, in her speciously honeyed Welsh voice and with her irresistible if toothless

smile, was, "Tell your *Cariad*—" But I needn't put that.)

"that the 'ooden 'ooman—it took me some time to remember that this was the figure-head on the cliff!—was want paint very bad, and she wonder would you do it when you come. Welsh people, I notice, are fond of 'wondering' like this, instead of asking straight out for what they want; yet they generally seem to get it."

(Dear me, this is rather different from the blank sheet I might have enclosed. . . . Anyhow, it mustn't get any longer than his, so I'd better stop now.)

"I will give this to Theo to post, and"

(Goodness, it is difficult to think of how to sign oneself to young men. To Sydney I was always "Yours sincerely." A stupid ending, means nothing at all.)

"With kind regards."

(No.)

"Assuring you always of my best attention,"

(No. A bit of that at the beginning was enough.)

“Will give this to Theo to post, and I am,”

(Well ! What I *am*, after all !)

“Your official *fiancée*,

“MONICA TRANT.”

Ah ! Now there's something I'd forgotten !

“P. S. I will remember what you've ordered—”

(No, that sounds rather nasty ; rather too like Manner B. Cross it out.)

—“what you—wish”? No! “What you suggest about my being pleased to see you on Saturday.

“N.”

As a matter of fact—I shan't write it, as it might possibly give a wrong impression!—but I really *shall* be quite pleased to see Billy Waters again. And now to find his young sister, and send her off to the post with what she, in her innocence, imagines to be a return *love-letter*!

CHAPTER XXII

THE WOODEN WOMAN

IF a girl were the least bit inclined to fall in love with Billy Waters—and I see now that some girls might be; though not, of course, any girl of my type, capable of this kind of frank friendship that puts anything else out of the question!—well, if she were, she'd find it much easier to complete the process here at Porth Cariad than anywhere else that I can imagine him.

Some men—generally the nicest—are so much more *themselves* in the depths of the country. He is.

I noticed that the very first evening he arrived here, when I went down to meet him—to keep up appearances before his family—at this tiny station on the branch line. Before the train stopped I saw his head and shoulders blocking up the open window of his compartment in his hurry to arrive. Catching sight of me on the platform, he took the pipe from between his strong white teeth and flourished it over his head in greeting—his face one broad smile because his holiday had begun; then the

train slowed down ; he was out of the carriage door and taking a running stride towards me.

"Hullo, Nancy !" he said, and grasped my hands. "You came ? I wondered if you would. It's very—appropriate of you. How are you ? You look very fit. A sun-bonnet, eh ?"—It was a haymaker's cotton one, that I'd bought for a shilling and a ha'penny at the post office, and rather becoming—"I've never seen you in a pink sun-bonnet before."

"You wouldn't be likely to in Leadenhall Street," I retorted. "How's the dear office ?"

"I don't know or care. I'm here to forget it," he said gaily as we left the station for the road between the sandhills. "I think I shall take to wearing a sun-bonnet myself !"

But what he wears here is just a soft white shirt with a turn-down collar and a pair of loose grey flannel bags belted at the waist ; no hat at all—his hair has got to look as if it must be permanently rumpled ; no one from the office would recognize him ! Even his eyes seem a different colour ; so much warmer and bluer for the deepening of his tan. He drops a year a day from his age, too. When one sees him striding about these sandy lanes, or terrifying his mother by those efforts to walk on his hands in six foot of water in the bay, or when he's pretending to jabber back Welsh to Mrs. Roberts

and Blodwen, who openly adore him—yes, I can imagine quite a number of people finding him positively attractive here in the country.

In the country, too, as I've always heard, it's so much easier to fall in love than it is in town. Town, with its rush and racket and roar, seems to insist that the things that really matter are getting on and making money—or even the bare living for which half these grimy crowds are struggling and toiling! But the country! —*that* has a way of suggesting itself as a series of lovely backgrounds for a grouping of Two, and of coaxing home the idea that all that matters is Love. To a falling-in-love kind of person the country here would seem as bad as Hamlet for being "*so full of quotations*" from every poet who ever wrote about trysts, and gathering rosebuds, and loves in valleys, and foolish, pretty nonsense of that sort. *They'd* be reminded of it by every dance of a pair of blue butterflies over the dunes; every spread of the rosy arms of sea-anemones in the pool towards the incoming wave; and as for these other waves of scented gold that are poured over all the waste ground hereabouts—

"It's a blessing there's such a lot of it out just now!" as Theo remarked this morning at breakfast. "I suppose engaged people *would* want to be where there was plenty of gorse!"

Whereat her brother and I exchanged glances,

across the table, of amused intelligence. For it's all very well for this child to think she can "chip" us with that old tag about kissing and the gorse in bloom. We've only got to remember how little she suspects that the only kiss between us is that "duty good night" one of Uncle Albert's visit, and the laugh is all on our side !

" You needn't laugh, Billy," Theo added. " You know you're really frightfully cross because you won't be able to get Nancy all to yourself this afternoon, with these people coming ! "

It was the first I'd heard of any visitors, for I'd come down rather late that morning. I hadn't slept as well as I usually do. Outside the window of my little sloping-ceilinged cottage bedroom the water, at high tide, had seemed to make rather more noise than its usual soft lap-lapping against the rocks. And then the moon, rising like a big round primrose-coloured Chinese lantern in the star-sprinkled purple sky over the Rivals on the other side of the Menai Straits, had poured a flood of white radiance straight upon my bed, and I hadn't bothered to get up and pull down the yellow linen blind to shut it out. I had wanted to feel the sea-scented night-breeze across my face. So I had lain there, tossing a little between the snowy rough country sheets, watching the square of light creeping inch by inch up the wall,

and thinking idly of all sorts of irrelevant things. . . .

Of Cicely in Marconi Mansions. . . .

Of "Smithie" at the office, and her boy. They didn't prove much truth in the theory that people fall more deeply in love in the country. I saw again that crossing at the Bank, with the big motor-buses skidding across the muddy road like beginners on skates ; and there, in the middle of the fog and the petrol-reek and the jostling luncheon-hour crowds, those two anæmic, Cityfied young faces shone as radiantly as if the lovers walked the loneliest Eden that ever was. . . .

Of a school-friend of my own, now very happily married, who had said to me, long ago : "An engagement, Monica, is such a *skimpy* time ! It's made up of nothing but good-byes and good nights to the person you most want to be always with !"

And of the difference between that sort of engagement and the "arrangement" between myself and Billy Waters, which has converted itself into such an entirely satisfactory and amusing friendship. . . .

The result was that I'd dropped off to sleep again after Blodwen's bang on my bedroom door, and that I'd been the last down at breakfast.

"Who's this that's coming, Billy ?" I asked.
"Your Uncle Albert again ?"

"No, thank—I mean, no, not him," said Billy. "Some French people you haven't met yet. They're touring North Wales in their car. He's a man I've had a good deal to do with in business."

"And *she*—" began Theo, stopping uncharacteristically short as her brother went on, tapping a letter he held.

"I've just heard from him that they're in Holyhead now, and coming over here to look us up this afternoon. So that puts a stopper on our plan of painting that figure-head for Mrs. Roberts after lunch. We'll have to see if we can get it done this morning instead. Good thing I got that paint last night at the wheelwright's. Are you on, Nancy? Then, if you're ready, we'll start now, shall we?"

"Blanche and I don't think we'll come, thank you," said Theodora punctiliously.

"What, not until you're asked?" laughed her brother, rummaging for the paint-pots under the southernwood bush at the cottage door. He gave me one pot and the brushes to carry, taking the other two himself. "Well, good-bye, all!"

"Come back, then, Cariad!" called Blanche, but the little white dog frisked unheedingly in circles ahead of us, across the shingle at the edge of the cove, over a couple of sandhills, then up the steps cut in the turf of the cliff

where the Roberts have set up a flagstaff and the wooden woman.

She'd been the figure-head of the *Gwladys Pritchard*, Mrs. Roberts had told us, which had been wrecked in the bay below, many years ago ; the name and the face alike having been copied from the real girl who was "cariad" to the owner of the vessel.

"She must have been pretty," I thought, the first time I climbed the cliff.

For many coats of paint, roughly applied, could not spoil or disguise the setting of the carved girl's eyes, nor the tender oval of the up-tilted chin, nor the lines of the neck flowing down into the sloping shoulders and the figure held up in an unmodern curve above the corset of the Sixties, which must have set the fashion of Miss Pritchard's dress. She wore a little jacket with basques and epaulettes and shoulder-seams set far down the sleeves ; and a tiny pork-pie hat, trimmed with a wing, was perched upon her hair, which had been last painted yellow as the gorse that grew in hummocks all around her. The jacket had been white, with trimmings of emerald green ; the same green, too, plastered the hat and the wooden nosegay which she held up against her breast. Yet, for all this crude green-and-white, for all the untaught modelling of it, there was a vitality about this graven

image which I'd never seen in any statue. Was it because it had once been part of that live thing, a ship ?

I could picture that image of a slender girl, leaning breast forward again from the prow of her lover's vessel as she heaved and dipped like a gull on the waves ; scanning horizons, joyously riding the gale, and free to sea and sky !

Rooted in turf, the immobility of cliff and rock was now her prison, while the gulls still screamed and wheeled above her. . . .

And the real *Gwladys* ?

"Did she go down with the ship ?" I'd asked Mrs. Roberts.

"No, indeed, mam. There wasn't one drowned on the *Gwladys Pritchard*," Mrs. Roberts had assured us. "That Miss Pritchard she was marry to my cousin, Captain Lloyd, since—dear me, I don't know when. They keepin' a public-house in Bluemaris now. Ô ! she is gone stout, too !"

"It would have been *prettier* if she'd been drowned," Blanche had said softly.

"Mam ?" Mrs. Roberts had said.

But Mrs. Waters had finished the story by telling us gently, "Anyhow, the Lloyds have three of the *sweetest* little grandchildren ; I've seen them !"

Evidently *she* had thought that for either woman or ship to be safe in harbour like that

was better than any more picturesque finale.
.... Well! I don't know....

* * * * *

We reached the flagstaff, and set down our pots of paint among the buffets of gorse that had sprays of purple ling and blue scabious growing through and making a bouquet of each.

Billy's shirt-sleeves are always rolled up to the elbow; the sleeves of my white cotton frock are three-quarter length; so we were both equipped for work, though I'd refused the offer of Mrs. Roberts' sackcloth apron. It was *too* coal-y and butter-y and paraffiny and scented with hen! But here the heady warm fragrance of the gorse almost drowned the smell of our paints.

"Scarlet, and black, and white? Scarlet for her hat and jacket, eh?" suggested Billy. "And how are we going to paint her hands and face? What colour's flesh?"

"Some people say it's just the colour of honeysuckle," I answered absently. I can't be perfectly certain that he *did* retort so sharply, below his breath, "*Does* he, indeed!" or that the name of Sydney Vandeleur had been threatening to crop up once more between us. Still, I was glad of the wide pink shelter of my sunbonnet as I added, in a matter-of-fact way, "You *could* get a sort of flesh-tint by mixing a

little of the red with the white paint, but I don't think I should. Suppose we leave the face and hands creamy-white as they are?"

"Very well; and her lips red, and the jacket and that toque affair, with more dabs of scarlet for the flowers in her bunch," he said, kneeling on the sun-warmed turf on the other side of the figure from me, "with a black wing in her hat."

"And her hair left as it is, too," said I.

"No, no! I got this on purpose for her hair," he said, and drew a full brushful of tar-black paint across the carven and crinkly locks in front, "she must be a brunette, this time."

"Oh, and Mrs. Roberts will be so annoyed to see her without her beautiful golden chignon," I protested, working away with the scarlet paint at the back of the jacket, "she'll think she's quite spoilt."

"Nonsense; looks much better like this," he declared. "A black-haired woman looks so much more *alive* than the others. Like red wine, dark grapes, crimson roses . . . fairer colours are insipid, washed-out-looking!"

"No woman thinks so," said I. "You never hear of a blonde tinting herself dark. It's always the other way about!"

"I know *one* girl who wouldn't change," he argued, glancing over the shoulder of the wooden woman at the border of dark hair between my bonnet and my face. "You needn't pretend

you would, miss ! Now what are you smiling at ? ”

“ Only something,” I said, “ that I’d just remembered.”

“ Yes ? (You’re an unexpected sex, aren’t you ?) Well, what was this ? ”

“ Only—look out, Billy, you’ll let that black drop run down the side of her face—only something a girl I know said about fair men being like weak tea ! ”

“ Meaning to say, I suppose, that she didn’t think much of *your* taste in *fiancés* ? ” suggested Billy Waters, with a mischievous laugh. I laughed too. And for the several score of times since we have been here together, I thought to myself what a delightful and unusual and thoroughly satisfactory arrangement this friendship of ours had turned out to be.

I never dreamed that at that very moment *the life of that friendship had about five more minutes to run.*

“ There ! ” said Billy, picking himself up and taking a few steps back from the figure, to survey it, with his fair head on one side. “ You can’t say it isn’t an improvement. What would your friend say to that coloured hair ? ”

“ Strong tea,” I suggested flippantly. “ Tea that’s stood too long ! ”

“ You aren’t looking at it. Come over here and see ! ”

I straightened myself and went and stood beside him.

"As a matter of fact, Nancy, the lady's got rather a look of *you*!"

And actually something in the contrast of the glistening black locks against the creamy-pale face with the now scarlet-tinted lips might have been vaguely characteristic of what, night and morning, I see in my own mirror.

"Well, but I hope *I* don't look as if I 'made up' my mouth!"

"Why, you *don't* make it up, do you?"

"Of course not," said I. And then I turned from looking at the painted figure to the other deeper, tenderer colour of the sea washing a strip of sand below the cliff.

"Oh, it *is* lovely here," I sighed, revelling in the beauty of that and the sky. "Did you ever *see* anything so blue as it is to-day?"

"Or so golden?" added Billy, nodding towards the hassocks of gorse in full bloom. "I've never seen it like this before. D'you know that there's a Welsh proverb that calls this county 'the land of thriftless gold'? Rather pretty, isn't it? It must have been wonderful here in the spring; this is the second crop, you know. A man I know once told me that it was like falling in love."

"How d'you mean?" I asked, as he stopped. "Aren't you going to paint the wing in her hat while you've that brush full of black paint?"

"Presently.—Oh, yes, about that gorse. He said the first blooming was more showy—more fuss made over it—first love, you know, and all that; but that it was nothing like as sweet as the later time. Should you agree with him, d'you think?"

"How *should* I know?" I retorted rather flippantly, to hide my intense surprise that Billy should possess—let alone quote!—a friend who sounded so utterly unlike himself. "You might know me well enough by this time to see I'm not that sort of girl!"

"Which sort of girl? The kind who doesn't fall in love a second time?"

"The kind who doesn't fall in love at all," I said decidedly. "Anyhow, I find the second blooming of the gorse, without any metaphors, quite beautiful enough against that dragonfly-blue bit of Bay!"

"Ah, yes! You're fond of the effect of flowering plants against the blue sea, as I think you mentioned, the evening my uncle dined at The Lawn," said Billy, teasingly and unexpectedly. "Only, didn't you specify oleanders and myrtles and the Riviera——"

"Oh, Billy! I never thought you'd do that," I interrupted him with real reproach. "No; I *never* thought you'd be so mean as to remind me, ever again, of that ghastly evening! I didn't!"

There was silence for a moment. He stared

down at me. I wouldn't look at him. I turned to look at a brown velvet bee that was buzzing some flattery or other into the golden ear of a gorse-blossom near by. Then I heard him say slowly :

“‘Ghastly,’ you call it ?”

“Well—! Of course !”

“I see,” he said, still more slowly. “You mean that it still rankles. You haven’t forgotten. . . . You resent that still, in spite of agreeing to be friends . . . in spite of letting one suppose that—well ! that it *wasn’t* so sickeningly hard for you now, after all. You *do* bear a grudge then, still. You mean—” It came out, the last thing I ever expected to hear him mention !—“that about that kiss !”

“That ?” I retorted quickly, and with my airiest laugh, for this seemed the only way in which to face the paralysingly embarrassing point he’d seen fit to raise again. “Oh, that ! I never gave it a thought, Billy ! I quite understood ! Besides, you couldn’t possibly call that private-theatricals sort of peck a *kiss*, exactly !”

“No,” he returned, as quickly. “You couldn’t, could you ?”

He took a step towards me, then caught me to him by the shoulders, and for a second I thought he was going to gratify the longing which I’d seen in his eyes any time during that first week of my stay at The Lawn.

I thought he was going to shake me.

But no.

In quicker time than it can be told, his hands had flown from my shoulders to the pink strings of my sun-bonnet ; he'd untied them and tossed the bonnet on to the nearest hassock of a gorse-bush. He put both brown hands under my chin and turned my face up to his. Before I could so much as gasp, he swooped down and kissed me, muttering, "But what could you call this—and this—and this ?" Three times—greedily—on the mouth.

For a second I had to clutch at his shoulder to steady myself ; for sea and cliff and gorse seemed wheeling round me in swirls of blue and green and gold.

Then I wrenched myself away and faced him—without seeing too distinctly what was in front of my eyes.

"Don't say anything to me," I heard myself tell him, in a voice that sounded unnaturally quiet and calm. "This—this can't be forgiven. Don't ask."

I heard him begin to say something about : "Do you think I am made of——"

"Don't speak to me again, please," I said, still in that unnaturally quiet voice. "Not again."

I snatched up my sun-bonnet from the gorse-bush, rammed it down over my hair, and tied

the strings so tightly beneath my chin that they nearly throttled me. Then I turned, saying, "I forbid you to follow me," and left him standing there between cliff and sky, beside the wooden woman.

I walked on until I thought I was out of his sight, then I ran ; ran blindly across the cove and up the sandy path to the cottages.

On the doorstep of the larger one Theo was sitting, emptying her white canvas shoes of sand on to the cobbles of the garden path.

"Hullo, Nancy ! Do you know that Cariad was so bored with you that he ran home ?" she said. "What have you done with Billy the Beloved ? Is he——"

"Let me pass, please," I said quietly, and walked swiftly into the house. The kitchen door was open and Mrs. Roberts was laying the table for the mid-day meal. She began, "Was you finiss paint the——" but I couldn't stop to speak to her. I ran up the rickety wooden stairs to my bedroom. There isn't a lock on the door ; I looked. So I just latched it, and went and sat down on my bed, with its patchwork quilt of faded pinks and mauves. I began tracing with my fingers the pattern made by the hexagonal patches of purple. I don't think I thought of anything at all.

And I don't know how long I'd been sitting there before I heard light steps on the staircase

and a tap at the door. I raised my voice a little.

"Don't come in."

"Nancy,"—it was Blanche—"dinner's ready!"

"I don't want any dinner. I am not coming down."

"Oh!—What's the matter, dear?"—with quick concern. "Are you ill?"

"No! I'm not ill!"

"Have you got a headache?"

"No! I haven't got a headache. Only please go away. I don't want to see anybody."

I heard her go softly downstairs again—then the kitchen door opening, and a murmur of voices.

His voice.

Ah! that brought my anger surging over me at last like a great wave. I sat bolt upright, with a crumple of the quilt clutched in each hand.

How dared he! How *dared* he!

Taking odious advantage of a situation! *This* was not what I agreed to when I said I would be nominally engaged to him.

This was not unavoidable, like that last time.

Oh! He needn't have pointed out to me the difference between that time and this! I'd *thought* I was angry then. My anger now was as different a thing as the difference between those two sorts of kisses.

Oh!

He's broken the contract—he knows that it was tacitly understood that there should be nothing of this—In fact, it wasn't so much as thought of—*ever*.

Right on my mouth! . . .

Well, I don't owe him anything after this. I shan't speak to him again. I shall have nothing more to do with him. He's a right to my name as his official *fiancée*, he can keep that—at a distance! My name—nothing else. I shan't go on staying with his people after this! Let him make what excuse he chooses to his mother about that. Let him explain it away as he likes. I shan't help him!

If it were to save his life, I'd never lift a finger to help him again!

I shall go away at once. . . .

How could he! Whether it was a vulgar attempt at flirtation, or simply that he was riled and meant to be rude to me in the most brutal manner he could think of—I don't care which it was!

What had I said—done—looked—that he should imagine he might?

After this, he might even say I'd encouraged him!

Hateful, *hateful*!

Well, I shall go away. . . .

Brute!

To-morrow, I shall *go*!

CHAPTER XXIII

“MANY WATERS—”

WELL! Anyhow there's no sense in sitting up in my room brooding over this thing, on a heavenly afternoon like this and all.

I'm not going to miss it all just to please *him*.

And if I am leaving everything—sea and sunshine and mountains—to-morrow, I may as well take in as much of them as I can to-day. Besides, I suppose I shall have to go down some time.

There are these people—whoever they are—expected this afternoon. Obviously I shall have to be at tea to meet them? I shouldn't in the least mind letting *him* down by remaining invisible until I'm all packed up and ready for the little local train that must take me up to Holyhead to meet the Euston mail. But there is his mother to consider—she has been so sweet to me from the beginning. What I can't understand about her is how she ever managed to have such a son? There must have been something

odd and horrid about the father ; and he must take after him. The *girls* are all right.

There they are, going out now ; down the sandy path to the station ; Theo bare-legged and bare-headed as usual, swinging a basket ; off to buy jam, I expect, for the visitors' tea ; Blanche carrying letters. I heard his step on the cobbles ten minutes ago, and Mrs. Waters always rests in her room until three o'clock. The coast's quite clear, then. Why shouldn't I go out and have my bathe ? I missed it this morning—thanks to all *that* ! Perhaps the cool green waves of the Bay will help me to feel as if I'd washed a little of that memory away from me. Already it seems years since my last bathe ; only yesterday morning ! when the girls and I ran down together, to find him already in, practising walking under the water ; and he'd called out “I say ! Isn’t it topping to be alive on a day like this ? ” as he emerged, head up once more, dripping and glowing in his indigo-blue sheath, his hair sleek once more with the wet, his arms and shoulders as smooth and pinky-white as any of ours, but making ours look curiously slender and delicate.

Years ago ! Everything had been so different ! I’d thought *he* was so different.

Well ! This will be my last bathe for the summer, so I may as well enjoy it, all to myself.



I undressed quickly, slipped into my black woven silk club costume, and twisted round my head the long orange silk scarf that keeps my hair from getting too wet. I simply won't take to one of those sponge-bag-like rubber caps that some girls still wear for bathing. They're too unsightly for anything—and one doesn't exactly want to look a blot on the seascape, even if there doesn't happen to be anyone else bathing, to see one. . . .

As it happened, I found, to my great annoyance, that there was someone else already in the little cove next to the cottages that it was Theo's idea to christen “The Bay of *Many Waters*.” There was a smooth head, some distance out, dark against the afternoon glitter; a steady stroke that I knew.

Oh!

So he'd come out first!

Well, that meant that I couldn't have my bathe here after all—just like him! . . . Fresh rage against him surged up in me as I caught up the white wrap of Turkey-towelling that I had thrown down upon a seaweedy rock with my string-soled shoes. I'd leave him to it. Perhaps I could get a dip in the next bay under that cliff where the wooden woman leaned forward to her watch?

But, even as I turned to slip away, I heard a sound from across the water that

seemed to make my heart, for a second, stop its beating.

It was a choking shout for help.

"Nancy!—Here!—Here!"

Then that dark head disappeared under the water.

It couldn't possibly have been for as long as it *seemed*. No!

People can't hold their breath for as long. Then it was up again. The swimmer had flung himself on his back and was floating. And I—without actually realizing what I had been doing, I must have cast off my wrap again, have splashed through the creamy surf of the first waves into the smoother jade-green depths beyond, for I found myself swimming, striking out, out—from the shore. . . .

Still I didn't know how I'd started—or why. Except that here was a human being in trouble whom, somehow or other, I had to help. I didn't think about who it was. It wasn't because of that broken shout of "*Nancy!*" I'm sure. No; I am sure that, just then, no thought of saving Still Waters was in my mind. It was just another human being who had called to me; and towards whom I swam so desperately, making, in my hurry, such a splashing over each stroke that it seemed to me endless before I came up to where he floated on his back.

Automatically I remembered something our

swimming-instructor had drilled into us at school. I found myself telling myself that it was dangerous—dangerous to get within reach of a drowning person's hands. They'd grip you, and you'd both go under.

“Keep behind him,” I was telling myself.
“Keep behind him ! ”

But there was no need for me to trouble about avoiding his clutch. When he spoke, I realized that he, in his danger, was keeping his head far better than I was. He was calm.

“Cramp,” I heard him say, “in my left leg. You'll have to tow me. Can you swim on your back ? ”

“Yes.”

Whether I could or not, I supposed, I should have to.

So in turn I flung myself on my back, and caught hold of him under those hard, strong-feeling arms of his.

Then began the struggle back to shore.

The tide was setting in, thank heaven ! and as long as we were in the deep waters it was not so hard. Presently we came to where the waves began to break. The wind was blowing off the shore, blowing the surfy crests of the waves backwards as a girl's hair is blown across her face . . . and presently I was half blinded by the spray that dashed over my head, into my eyes and mouth.

I choked, panted. . . .

"Rest a minute," said a voice close to me.
"No hurry. The tide will take us both in." . . .

But, getting my breath, I struggled on again, yard by yard. Again I got a mouthful; spluttered, coughed.

"All right—all right—take it easy!" the voice was saying.

I simply couldn't pay any attention to that—I was labouring with all my strength for both—for myself and this log in the water that I must—*must* get ashore. I was startled when he gave a sudden powerful jerk of his shoulders that altered our course.

"You'll have us on to the reef," he said.
"I'll steer—don't work so hard—"

I heard myself gasping.

—"don't get flurried, Nancy!"

"Nancy!" Yes! Then I did realize who it was that I was tugging along with me for dear life. His life was in my hands—mine, when I'd felt ready to murder him an hour ago. I'd had to save it. . . . "Serve him right," I thought wildly, as I struggled along. "Oh, serve him right! I'll show him—I'll teach him to kiss me again."

Indeed, I'm not sure that I wasn't muttering this aloud to myself in the water. Anyhow, voices seemed buzzing in my ears—one was his own as I'd heard it yesterday—"I say! Isn't

it topping to be alive? Isn't it topping to be alive?"

And then it seemed to come to the very last effort I could make. "*Ah!*" I heard myself groan.

The next thing of which I was conscious came with a shock of surprise. It was the soft jolt of my shoulders against sand.

We were aground!

For a minute or so I must have been swimming furiously in my depth, without even feeling the growing warmth of the shallows about me.

I let go my wild, unneeded clutch of his arms, staggered to my feet, waded in, then dropped again, face downwards and panting, on to the beach, a few yards below the tide-mark of crisp, black seaweed, straws, and broken shell.

It was over—we were safe. And now—what?

I didn't know.

Anyhow, for a moment I lay there unable to rise or speak. I threw my arm across my eyes. Then I found that he'd dragged himself up beside me. He was leaning over me; saying something I was too dazed to catch.

I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want him to say anything. He needn't suppose I'd intended to save his life. He needn't think this absurd crisis had made any difference. There was still this morning between us. There

always would be. This made no difference. None! None at all!

I got up again, hearing my teeth chatter a little. I turned to the rock where I'd thrown down my peignoir, and as I did so, I heard him behind me raise his voice a little :

"I say! I can't, you know!—You'll have to help me up to the cottages, I'm afraid—"

I glanced down at him ; he was sitting up, his face a little white under the tan, but quiet and expressionless. And as I looked at him, sitting there backed by the empty, sunlit cove and the cliff with the figure-head and flagstaff small as toys in the distance, I passed through the one second's most extraordinary experience of my life.

Was it a waking-dream, or what ? The result of shock and over-exertion, like those buzzing voices, just before, among the waves ? For of all the mad, impossible fancies to dash into one's mind—before one's eyes, even !—this was the maddest.

This was what happened in that second's space :

Vividly there flashed before me a picture of my own Self just as I was then, in my black silk maillot with my wet black hair streaming down my neck ; for I'd lost my scarf, it floated like a torn-off strand of orange-coloured seaweed on the waves. I saw it there. . . . And I saw that mind-picture

of myself fling herself down on her knees beside him again—fling herself into his arms, cold from the sea-water and dripping and hard ; saw her bury her face against his throat ; heard, more clearly than in a dream, her gasping sob of, “Billy ! You were drowning ! I might have lost you !”

Then—flick ! the picture vanished, and I was drawing my wrap about me composedly enough as I replied to him coldly, “I will help you up —on one condition. That you don’t speak to me.”

He said quietly, “You prefer that ?”

“Only on that condition,” I repeated.

“Very well,” he rose slowly to his feet, trying them one after the other in the sand. “Only—I’m afraid I shall have to lean on you a bit—not hard.”

So, after I’d helped him on with his own wrap, I stood for him to put his arm about my shoulders. I don’t know if he leaned hard or no. Slowly and in silence, we walked up so from the shore to the cottages. Just before we got to the sandy path in front, his arm dropped, and he smothered an exclamation :

“Hul-lo !”

For, tilted up between the deep ruts made by Mr. Roberts’ cart in the sand in front of the cottage gardens, we caught sight of a motor-car ; a gaudy, cherry-coloured affair, all ablaze with sunlit brass. The visitors. They’d

come, then. I'd forgotten *them*. They were in my cottage at tea, I discovered, after he had turned quickly in at the little gate of the cottage he shares with Blanche; from behind the door of the kitchen sitting-room of our larger one I heard a babble of talk and much laughter. Must I face it? With this dreadful day behind me? Slowly I mounted the wooden stairs to my room and began to dress. I was, all of a sudden, deadly tired; why, I felt only half awake; what I would have liked would have been to fling myself down on that patchwork-quilted bed and sleep the time away until I was to leave Porth Cariad for ever.

That this must needs have happened this afternoon, to add to the conglomeration of things between him and me that I longed to forget! After the way he behaved this morning!

(Ah, Billy, why did you? We were such chums!) *Caddish* of him! To think that he *might*—that I could be treated so!

That fact remained—and all the waves in the Bay of Many Waters hadn't washed any of its bitterness away. As for that mad, mad fancy of mine afterwards on the beach—well! it must have been something like the way people declare that the whole of a drowning person's past life rises before them in the moment of peril. Only, of course, those would be pictures of things that

had happened—not the reverse of anything that ever, ever *could* happen!

One thing—I'd never let him thank me for the outwardly magnanimous act into which I'd been just forced, and which had left me too utterly exhausted even to rage over it as I might. My arms felt almost too limp to raise to my head as I wrung my streaming hair into a towel and pinned it, still wet, firmly about my head. It took me minutes to put on each garment. Meantime those minutes were ebbing away, and these people downstairs were being kept waiting, expecting to see his official *fiancée* at the tea-table. And if I felt I couldn't stay up here as I longed to do, it wasn't on his account. It wasn't the girl he'd engaged—and insulted so!—it was his mother's guest who confronted in the wavy looking-glass her very washed-out appearance, her dark, ringed eyes and damp hair plastered down to keep it from dripping on to the first clean blouse that had come to hand.

Certainly I looked very little credit to him!

With a shrug I turned away and went downstairs.

* * * * *

The warm kitchen seemed full of people and their voices, and of a mingled scent of brewing tea and warm butter and—could it be a whiff

of perfume: *tréfle*? The tea-table was crowded with Mrs. Roberts' gayest crockery, with her largest black teapot, with mounds of yellow light-cakes and clusters of brown eggs and great slabs of Welsh farmhouse bread-and-butter. In the middle a glass jug held a bouquet of heather and honeysuckle and blue scabious. There was a dish of damson jam, and a very golden, "shoppy" cake.

At the head of the table, Mrs. Waters was entertaining a stout, sallow gentleman with a black moustache and a plaid tie, who was talking French very fast and with a good deal of gesture. Blanche, elbows on the table, was leaning eagerly across it to talk; opposite to her were her brother, looking much as usual again, I saw, and Theodora in a state of flushed animation, from whom, in the general babble, I caught something that sounded like "tell Billy's sweetheart—" and between Theodora and him there sat, leaning back in her chair and laughing gaily, a young girl in a wonderfully-cut and simple get-up of flame-yellow and white and cream, with a swirl of feathery yellow about her midnight black hair; one of the prettiest girls I'd ever seen in my life. Ah! it was she who'd brought in that whiff of clover-scent?

She was laughing up into his face.

And she was calling my official *fiancé* "Billy."

CHAPTER XXIV

THAT GIRL

THERE was a scraping of wooden chair-legs on the tiled kitchen floor as I came in, and the men rose.

Mrs. Waters introduced "Our friend Monsieur Charrier and his daughter"—and the stout gentleman, who wore pale-hued boots shaped like the blades of oars, bowed until I could see the rolls of fat beneath his collar behind, then shot at me out of eyes like two black currants a glance that made me feel utterly disapproved-of and "found wanting." The girl gave me a look less frankly measuring, while the whitest teeth in the world flashed in her little face, oval and smoothly olive as the shell of one of those eggs on the table.

She was very lovely. . . .

She held out her hand and gave mine the violent shake that foreigners seem to think so truly English ; and then I slipped into the empty place next to Blanche, feeling thankful for the tea which Mrs. Waters handed to me in a large

cup decorated with a group of Welsh women in the costume never seen except on china.

I drank it in a kind of thirsty dream ; I couldn't have talked to save anyone's life just then ; but the talk was buzzing on all around.

"—planned to go to-morrow ; but shall you be here ?"

"—since we find ourselves in such charming neighbourhood, we could prolong our sojourn—"

"Oh, yes, *do* prolong it ! So ripping for Blanche and me to have Odette to go about with ! Of course, we never *see* Billy and Nancy here !"

"Don't believe her, Odette !" he was laughing quite naturally.

"—can't call your shore your own, this year ! You don't know what it is to have an engaged couple in the place !"

"No ? It is not agreeable ?" The pretty French girl turned to smile at him again. "You do not encourage me to come, so !"

"I'm writing a book about it—"

"Theo dear, finish your tea and don't talk so much !"

"'The Complete Gooseberry' it's called, if you know what that means."

"Ah ! Place where you find the little babies ! Yes ?"

"No ! not place ! People ! Unengaged

ones like us and you and everybody but *Them.*"

"—Enchanted, madame!"

"—with rules like this: '*Don't cough outside doors; they hate it. Far better not go in!*'"

"—More hot water, please, Blodwen——"

"—*Don't stalk them with a camera. You never get anything worth printing!*"

"—And will I bring a two more fress negg, mam?"

"*If one of them's away, don't ask who's got the ink!*"

"—No, but do you remember the bathing at Dinard?"

"—Next year, perhaps——"

"—start before lunch——"

"—if the tide's right——"

"—But, Monsieur Charrier, as you were saying——"

"—icy!"

"—as warm as warm!"

"How was it to-day, Nancy?"

"Nancy, I believe you stayed in too long, dear," murmured Mrs. Waters gently to me as she passed my cup down again.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said vaguely, trying to smile at her. She was the only one of the party to whom I felt I could turn in my utter fatigue and bewilderment. For in that party I felt myself as a sort of plain and

neglected little nursery-governess. It seemed impossible that anyone should ever have admired *me*—that Major Montresor had ever paid me compliments—or Sydney wanted to marry me! —or that, for at least a moment, my employer had found me attractive enough to flirt with. I hadn't looked at him, but I knew he hadn't glanced once at me. His attention was entirely divided between Monsieur Charrier, to whom he listened with a deference new to me, and that pretty French fashion-plate in white and cream and tango-colour, who laughed whenever her host said anything at all.

Yes! She was very lovely. She made me feel dowdy and drab and *gauche* beyond words. Even at my best I should have felt that she outshone me; even if I did possess longer eyelashes and a flush of pink and a dimple, what were these compared with the finished *chic* of the way she wore hair and clothes—to her scintillating vivacity? No wonder the man beside her was so obviously lost in admiration of her!

Men adore a girl who's "*bright*," who amuses them while she saves them the trouble of thinking what to say. I believe that somewhere at the back of every man's mind there's a fancy portrait of himself, in a sultan's turban, applauding condescendingly while some fair dancing-girl postures and performs for his pleasure.

Men! Even the ones who have seemed

"whitest," as Jack calls it, turn out to be cads in the end. Trying to flirt with the girl to whom you're nominally engaged, and whom you'll never marry, is the sort of "joke" that appeals to a masculine sense of humour. Yes, even when the possessor happens to be really attracted by quite another girl. For it didn't take me many seconds of silent looking-on to see what game was being played between my employer and that girl.

"Odette, are these your gloves?"

He picked them up from the floor when at last we all rose.

"*Your* gloves, Billy," retorted Mademoiselle Charrier gaily. "Still a pair from the beautiful great box you bought me. You remember, yes?"

"Ah, the box you won from me at that flying-meeting. Of course I remember."

And I too remembered hearing of those gloves and this bet, ages ago—the afternoon after I had been out to lunch for the first time with my official *fiancé*.

So this was the young French girl he'd told me about! And as I watched them standing chatting together, a little apart from the group round the motor outside, I suddenly gave a quick guess at something else he might have had to tell me about her if he'd chosen.

This very girl had something to do with his

official engagement to me! Somehow or other, she was his “reason” for appearing to have a fiancée at all—a fiancée upon whom he’d been so particular to impress that “this affair would never end in marriage!” Possibly my employer and that girl were already secretly—but really, not nominally—betrothed to one another?

It looked like it. It looked uncommonly like it.

At something he said she blushed quite rosily. Oh, and they mustn’t think I didn’t notice her shake of the head and her quick little silencing frown at my official *fiancé* when her father, in a tea-coloured alpaca dust-coat, at last left off fussing over his engines and asked them if they—calling them “*mes enfans*”—were ready to start?

“Oh—but are you going too, then, Billy?” his mother put in quickly. Monsieur Charrier answered with a flow of French about “*affaires*,” and documents which he had left at his hotel in Holyhead, which it would be so much, so much better if Mr. Waters would spare but a little half-hour to investigate.

“Very good of you to give me the opportunity, sir,” said Mr. Waters. “I can get a train back, mother.”

“Ah, but no, but no! The auto will be again at your service as soon as we have dined at that

dog of an hotel," declared the stout Frenchman. "I will bring your son home quite safely, madame, to you and"—with a particularly hollow show of politeness—"to mademoiselle!"

Here his daughter murmured something about the four seats in the auto, plenty of space for mademoiselle his *fiancée* if she would deign to accompany—

I expect Mademoiselle Charrier knew well enough how safe it was to issue that invitation! So did my employer, when he struck in with "Ah, that's very nice of you," then turned and addressed me directly for the first time since we had walked up from the beach together.

"Yes! That would be a good idea, wouldn't it? You'll come along too, won't you, Nancy? We could get a trap back."

I excused myself as naturally as I could manage it, with something about being rather tired. It was true enough.

As that cherry-coloured car panted, jerked, then whizzed off down the stone-wall-bordered Holyhead road, with its trio of passengers, I felt almost as if it had driven straight over me.

And I felt as if I shouldn't have cared very much one way or the other if it had!

CHAPTER XXV

THE FIRST AVOWAL

I SUPPOSE I must have dropped off to sleep directly I threw myself down on my bed, and have slept for some time.

It was growing dusk in my little bedroom ; outside my window veils of purple gauze were drawn over sand-hills and shore, and the tide was far out again by the time I was awakened by a tap at my bedroom door.

“ Yes ? ” I called drowsily, wondering, for a second, where I was, and what horrible thing it was that seemed lying in wait for me to wake up properly and remember it.

The door opened and Mrs. Waters came in, carrying a little tray.

“ I’ve brought you this, dear.” It was a glass of ginger wine with two biscuits laid over the top of it. “ I know you stayed in the water too long this afternoon ; you were done up. Drink it up, child.”

I sat up, and she put out her hand to smooth my damp hair while I finished the glassful.

"That's better, isn't it?"

"Much, thank you," I sighed gratefully; for the wine had seemed very heartening, and heartening was what I needed. The horrible memory had come back to me. Two of them, in fact: that of this morning, even before that of this afternoon. His mother knew nothing of either; *that* I read in the pink, December rose of a face under the grey hair. The dear! and I must leave her. . . .

"I've brought you something else too," she said, almost shyly, like a schoolgirl who isn't sure that she won't be snubbed; "something you'll like."

She put her hand to her soft black muslin bodice, unfastened something that was hidden inside, and brought out a thin, old-fashioned pendant of flat gold, slung on a slender golden chain.

She opened it and held it out to me. I took it in my hand and carried it to the window, where there was still enough light by which to see it well.

Coiled up below the oval glass, faintly gold as thistle-down in sunshine, and fine as floss-silk, there was a baby's curl.

"That was the very first curl I ever cut from Billy, the day that he was christened," his mother told me softly, sitting on the side of my bed, while I stood, not knowing how to speak to her,

by the window. "He had such pretty hair always!" she went on, "quite as pretty as Theo's is now. Only boys—men always seem to look upon curly hair as a sort of affliction; they're never satisfied unless they're flattening it out with brushes and horrid stuff out of bottles, are they? And when we all go back to Seven-oaks again, Nancy—"

I lifted my head to try to interrupt her, to say something about my being forced to go away before, but no words came; she went on talking, as if more to herself than to anyone else, of what seemed, just then, almost unbearable to me.

—"I'll show you heaps of other little things that belonged to him as a baby. His very first tiny shirt! They put new babies into shirts then, you know. Fine linen, with narrow, real lace round the neck and the little sleeves . . . Oh, of course I know those silk-and-wool vests they have now are much more sensible. I'm *quite* modern, really. Still—there's a lovely embroidered christening-robe of his . . . all his robes. I made others for Blanche and Theo. I'd a fancy to keep them all separate, so that when they—my babies!—grew up and married they could have them handed on. So all Billy's will be for you, Nancy—and the little locket. I knew you'd care to keep it."

"I?" I cried, aghast and huskily. I held it back to her. "Oh, no! It's not for me!"

"Of course it is. I always meant to give it to his bride on her wedding-morning."

"Then you keep it for—for her, until then," I broke in, with a little laugh that sounded wild in my own ears, and I pressed the pendant with the christening-day curl back into his mother's hand. She said nothing for a moment.

Presently, in the dusk, I felt her long arm slip round me, and her hesitating, gentle voice was saying very earnestly and pitifully: "Nancy! You do care for my boy, don't you?"

And then into that day of queer and crowded horrible happenings, there was packed yet another.

In my own ears I heard my own voice answering his mother's appeal with words I could scarcely recognize as my own. Yet it was no freak of imagination this time. It was no mad fancy like that on the beach. It was I, Monica Trant, who in that voice so shaking and strained cried desperately:

"Oh, yes! Yes! You know I care for him!"

And with that avowal in my ears I felt as if some stranger had cried aloud a secret that I had never even guessed, but that now—now I knew to be coming true.

I found myself putting out my hands before me, almost as if this growing knowledge were something that I could hold away from myself.

For a time I must hold it away ; I *must* ! For at least as long as I remained here. I clenched my hands tightly, dropping them to my sides, using all my will to bring myself to speak in my usual voice again.

"Will you tell me what time it is, Mrs. Waters ? "

"Half-past seven. You'll go to bed early, dear, won't you ? You won't stop up ! "

"No, I'll go to bed."

"And to-morrow—Nancy, I don't want to say much more. Only, Life promises to be so golden, dear, for you and him ! "

It was then that she gave me a sting that I wish I could forget. I *shall* forget, but not at once, that his mother said :

"Fate has been merciful to let you two meet. Don't let that be spoiled ! To-morrow—"

I held her hand with that little locket in it clutched for a minute against my breast.

"It shall be different to-morrow," I whispered before she went, keeping my meaning to myself. It will, of course, be "different" enough !

Half-past seven. There was just time, then, to send my wire.

I crept out silently over the sand-hills and away to the tiny post office where, thank goodness, the postmistress's literal English won't allow her to read much between the lines of this.

"To Harradine, Marconi Mansions, Battersea, London.

"Please send off immediately to Trant, care Waters, Porth Cariad, Anglesey, telegram as follows : (Begins.) 'Please return at once ; am ill, must see you, Cicely.' (Ends.) —From Tots."

If she only has the sense to answer that correctly, and at once !

CHAPTER XXVI

“ ALL CHANGE HERE ”

CICELY'S answering wire—for a wonder correctly worded—arrived this morning at breakfast as I came down.

I've shown it to the Waters: explained that I must be off at once. Only Theo protested angrily, “Your chum ill? How *careless* of her just when we were such a jolly party, and going to Red Wharf Bay with the Charriers to-morrow, and all!” The others accepted it with scarcely a word. They didn't even show that they found it odd that Miss Harradine, who lives in Battersea, should hand her telegram in at Euston Station—though I wondered over that myself. Not even Mrs. Waters said a word to press me to wait and send a nurse instead; she didn't ask when I thought I might come back. If she *looked* questions I didn't see them; I was steadfastly keeping my eyes for breakfast-cups, and clocks, and time-tables, and anything but the faces of these people I'm going

to leave—for good. All the morning I've spent in my bedroom, packing-up.

Twice, while I was busily emptying drawers and laying out my things in folded heaps on the bed, I heard outside my window a whistle like a blackbird's note ; but this time I wasn't taken in for a moment. I knew it wasn't a blackbird. I took no notice of him.

I went on packing, laying my string-soled bathing shoes at the bottom of my trunk. A long time before I shall need *those* again ! I let him whistle.

He tried something else.

Twice there was a sharp tap on the pane, just as when that thrush was cracking a snail. But I knew that this time it really was a pebble thrown up to catch my attention : thrown, not from the trimly-gravelled sweep in front of a big house, but from the cottage garden planted with sandy white pinks and lad's-love—thrown to bring me down. I wasn't to be either whistled or tapped to his side.

I rolled my sun-bonnet—there was a little rip where it had caught on a gorse prickle—into a tight pink bundle and rammed it down beside my shoes.

I wasn't going down.

Then came a crunching on the cobbles of the path below, and a soft call of “Nancy !”

Not I ; I wasn't going down.

“Nancy!”—more urgently. “I say!”

No! Let him think what he liked of me—rude, obstinate, childish, or sullen—as long as he only didn’t guess *why* I didn’t mean to go down, or even look out the window to answer him. I couldn’t face it now. Not with what my own lips had first told me of the thing which I had to hold away from me, at arm’s length, for as long as I had the strength.

“Nancy!”

Evidently he was set on saying something to me—but whether it was about yesterday morning or yesterday afternoon I didn’t care. I was equally set on his not having the chance. Now I was afraid this chance would happen after lunch, and I was grateful to that which prevented his taking me up to Holyhead and seeing me off by the Euston mail alone.

I rejoiced over the timely and snorting arrival of that magenta-coloured “auto” of the Charriers, bringing over Monsieur with some more of his business-documents, and Mademoiselle with business that a child might guess at.

I leaped at their proffered lift of luggage and all, back to Holyhead Station, and the four of us went off together.

Then, sitting beside this French coquette, who seemed bent on seeming sweet to me—(Why? I suppose because the girl to whom he is engaged feels that it’s “in the picture” to be

generous to the girl he *has* “ engaged ”)—my heart sank, and I wished I hadn’t accepted. We were speeding along far too fast along the level road towards the purple hump of the Holyhead mountain. We should be there too soon. Heavens ! There’d be half an hour to wait at the station, and he could get what he wanted to say in then. . . .

Why hadn’t I thought of that ! If something would only happen. . . .

It did.

Never, never has a motor breakdown been hailed with delight before by a passenger ; but I blessed the fortunate accident that kept Monsieur Charrier and my employer fumbling, fidgeting and fuming about the bonnet for over half an hour by the roadside. Mademoiselle, in her lemon-coloured wrap and daring little hat, sat on the top of a low stone fence with me in my brown silk coat and skirt in which I’d first travelled down to The Lawn. I was so delighted by the delay that I could even laugh quite gaily at her as she chattered.

“ Always the same ! Each time that we take a passenger to make very quickly, there arrives this *malheur* ! . . . Now, now, it is good ? it is well ? it is right ? No ? . . . Regard my father, Miss Nancy, on the earth under the auto nearly : he look like a little fat dog that has been run over, not ? Ah look at this brave

Billy, always the same idea, *encore un* spanner ! Now he will lick her into shapes! . . . It is finish, Billy? No? . . . Ah, he is doing it express, on purpose. . . . You will loose the train, and Mademoiselle must return with you —what a chancey day!"

Mercy! Return with him?—the midnight train would be impossible—I should be kept until the next morning—Horrors! My heart was in my mouth at the thought. . . .

It was with two minutes to spare, however, that we flung ourselves, with the hastiest of thanks, out of the motor, and rushed into the busy station that stretches down to the quay, where a couple of slanted funnels seemed as big as two leaning towers of Pisa painted red. No time to lose. He found me a corner-seat facing the engine, in a carriage with one other lady. He attended to my luggage with the speed and ease of a man who can make men obey, then he looked straight at me and began: "I haven't time now, but look here, I shall——"

Again I baffled him.

"I have nothing to read!" I cried, as if in dismay over the fact. "Will you fetch me a paper—anything?"

With a little jerk of his shoulders he turned away to the bookstall, and I sat back in my corner looking dully out at the moving bustle

on the platform below the big Norman Wilkinson posters of steamboats on a moonlit sea. Why couldn't we start—it must be time! I'd said good-bye to his people, said it as if I were going no further than for one of my afternoon tramps at Porth Cariad with him. Now it was to him that I must say good-bye . . . I couldn't take it in yet. I didn't want to. Above all, I didn't want him to say it—or anything else.

Again the situation was unexpectedly saved.

The carriage-door burst open, and a man, panting with haste, flung a cape and a blue-covered *English Review* on to the seat opposite mine, drew his handkerchief over his brow with a “ Phew ! ” that meant “ Only just done it ! ” then leaped out again on to the platform, calling, “ Porter ! when is this train due off ? ”

“ She ought to be off now, sir ; we've been kept back by the boat, we're ten minutes behind time.”

But it was not this that made me sit up and turn quickly to the man who'd dropped back into the seat opposite to me. Slim shape, soft hat, Vandyke profile—yes, I thought I'd recognized the voice. Sydney Vandeleur, of all people—and at this moment! At any other, I might have longed to pick up that *English Review* and hurl it at his picturesque head, but, for just this one occasion, I was overjoyed to see

him. My employer wouldn't be able to say any last words now, before him.

"Monica—Miss Trant!" exclaimed Sydney quickly. "How odd! Did you see *her*?"

"See whom?"

"Why, Cicely!"

Cicely! The tone in which he used her Christian name told me all there was to know, *there!* I'd thought so!

"I've been seeing her off, you know, to Ireland—the Dublin boat—just gone off." He nodded towards the quay. "Had to get back to London to-night; I am meeting the Mamma in Pont Street to-morrow morning, and—"

"Take your seats, please! Take your seats!" The guard's whistle was at his lips as my official fiancé came racing back along the platform. An armful of papers and magazines fell on to my lap.

"Here you are, Nancy. And, I say! I'm going to—"

What he was going to say broke off again with a snap. And the last glance I had of his blonde, sun-brownèd face and quick eyes showed them frozen in a stare of utter astonishment at the sight of my travelling-companion.

Yes—my goodness! What would he think of finding me with Sydney again?—Sydney, whose name has so often nearly cropped up between us. Would he think—?

What difference would it make if he did ?

The train steamed out of the station across the flat Anglesey country, between marshlands ghostly-white with bog-cotton in the dusk. . . . What would he think ?

This was what occupied me all the time Sydney was talking, for he was in a mood to talk to anyone. I, for example, was not the Rose, but I had shared rooms with the Rose, and he was eager to tell me about her, and how she had gone to stay with his married sister until—something or other to do with "the Mamma." Poor Lady Vandeleur, fated to see her only son falling in love with such totally ineligible girls ! First a City typist at twenty-five shillings a week ; now a Bond Street mannequin !

But my employer didn't know of this change. How could he ? He probably—yes, certainly ! —imagines things are as they might once have seemed to be.

Will he think I arranged this ?

"Of course you know her—but not as one does now!—the last few weeks ! We were together at the Café Royal—He's going to paint her—Colouring !—Wonderful ! You should have seen the costume I designed for her—Five Arts Ball— Purposely giving the effect of—Quite in the period, of course !—People who understand !—Such *souplesse* of mind as she has—" Sydney went on to the air.

My whole attention was for someone very different.

He can't imagine I'd do anything so underhand! Even if he did imagine that—well, I couldn't explain unless he asked. If he did ask, I could explain less than ever! Oh, why can't I wipe four months straight out of this year and begin again? But then, there would have been Jack to help! But then, there would have been Sydney. . . . I should have been engaged to this creature before me in that hat, talking of Cicely's *soupleness* of mind! If he—the other one—only knew what I really think of Sydney!

"Fancy," I commented haphazard to the rhapsodist before me. "Well; I do hope everything will be all right." And I took up the magazine my employer had tossed on to my lap—there was a picture on the cover of a pretty Summer-girl looking over the sea—and prepared to hold it up in front of me for the rest of the journey.

Sydney—surprised and sulky—read his *English Review*. Presently I refused his not too pressing invitation to join him in the dining-car, and he left me for an hour and a half.

For love, that robs us women of the appetite for anything but Romance, seems to make men even hungrier for their food.

“Eus-tern!” came the familiar Cockney bawl again at last. “Eus-tern!”

It was a change, after what I’d been used to for the last few weeks, to have to fend for myself in the matter of luggage and a taxi. One doesn’t specially look to men in love for decent manners. Still—that other one knew how to pay these attentions in spite of his Odette and her gloves! Sydney’s evidently the type that pays homage to the Well-Beloved by being casual towards every other woman. He seemed to efface himself until his lukewarm offer of getting me a cab could be answered from the cab-window.

“Ah—may I tell him to drive to Marconi Mansions, Miss Trant?”

“I’ve told him, thanks. How fearfully hot it is here, and how stuffy”—I sniffed with distaste—“after the country!”

“Yes, isn’t it?—one’s almost consoled for Her being away, in that lovely, soft, pure air of Bally-cool! Good night!”

The last sort of night I thought I’d have! But once back in my familiar little camp-bed in Marconi Mansions, I tucked my cotton dressing-gown round me because no sheets had been left out, and fell into that dreamless trance of utter tiredness.

I slept like a log all night.

(*Next day.*)

How the flat seems to have shrunk ! and what a state Cicely has left it in ! Has she moved *all* our ramshackle furniture since I was here last ? Used that table to be right in the middle of the room, choking it up like this ?—and where's my dear print of "Kitty Fisher" that used to hang just *there*, where she's put that framed oil-sketch of—what on *earth* ? It looks like a study, by Blossom, of that coloured tie of Sydney's—and there's a little red "*sold*" label on it. I suppose he bought it for her out of one of the shows at the Grafton Gallery. The couch, too, is littered with books . . . Marinetti . . . Schnitzer . . . Tangore . . . Strindberg's "*Stronger Woman*" . . . a slender volume, "*The Everlasting Mercy*," inscribed "*To Cicely, from her devoted S. V.*"

H'm ! Cicely among the intellectuals ? Well, I suppose some of us are made adaptable as water, taking the shape of any vessel we're poured into by Man. Perhaps—perhaps I might have been the same, if—

But I do wish she'd had the *souplesse* or the *something* ! to throw away, before she left, this litter of florists' half-dead flowers, expensive stale roses and carnations, that fills up every one of our pots and crocks.

I'd better do it, I suppose. . . .

Also I'd better wash up my breakfast-things—and Cicely's of the day before, which are heaped upon the kitchen table.

On the top of an oily quarter-pound of butter there's a very dirty note.

*“ Dear Miss I am unable to come today has
my little girl is queer hoping no inconvenience yrs
truely mrs skinner.”*

All right. I'll wash up . . . loathsome job ! That kettle always took so long to boil—we ought to have a flat-bottomed one like the one they use for picnics at the Waters'. It's a good thing I'm able to think so composedly of them. Doesn't it show, after all, that—what I told his mother, what I thought I should have to hold away from myself so determinedly, may not really be true . . . may not, anyhow, be the deep and lasting sort of “ true ” that I imagined ? Just a fancy, a passing, summer-holiday attraction for someone who'll never guess. It must—it *shall* be that. No harm in remembering him—all of them. Let's see. To-day was to be their excursion to Red Wharf Bay. I can see the whole party—and their jolly, sun-browned faces against the throbbing blue of sea and sky. Odette Charrier will be like some bright foreign bird just alighted amid the homely gold of the Welsh gorse . . . prattling away in her pretty

broken English that I believe she sometimes breaks on purpose to hear Billy Waters' amused, boyish laugh.

They'll be together all the time to-day—no official *fiancée* to intervene with even the shadow of a claim. . . .

Together they'll be unpacking the picnic basket, hunting for the corkscrew, picking up big, sun-warmed pebbles from the beach to lay at the corners of the white picnic cloth to keep it from flying into the sea.

The others will be—oh, somewhere about. . . .

Those two will stroll off after lunch, I suppose. I wonder if they'll bathe? *He* wouldn't have lost his nerve even after that afternoon swim. . . . *Only yesterday?* They'll bathe from the rocks, I expect. And I might still have been there. . . .

A ring at the door of the flat. Milk, Mrs. Skinner, or—what?

I'd better go and see. . . .

They call *us* the unexpected sex, of whom no man can ever say what we shall be at next.

What about themselves?

Only last evening I'd left him standing, stiff with astonishment, on the Holyhead platform. This morning here he was again, blocking up the tiny entrance to our flat—my official *fiancé*!

CHAPTER XXVII

PARTING COMPANY

THANK heaven for the instinct that silenced the welcoming “Billy!” before it broke from my lips. Thank heaven also for that numbness all over me that allowed me to say in a voice as detached as if it had been the piano-tuner to whom I’d just opened the door, “Oh! good morning.”

“Good morning.” A tone as blank as a whitewashed wall between him and me. “I suppose you are surprised to see me.”

“Well, I—yes, I am, of course.”

“You didn’t expect me.”

“No.” We both glanced down at my sleeves, still rolled up from the kitchen.

“I have something to say to you,” he went on in that same tone. His face I couldn’t see in that little, dark drainpipe of a passage where we stood. “That’s why I came.”

“Oh!”

What could it be that brought him an eight hours’ journey on my track? Surely not that

foolish old out-of-date apology still—or those unwanted thanks for saving his life.

"Don't you want to hear what it is?"

"Er—yes; oh, yes," reluctantly. "But I'm sorry I can't ask you to sit down here; you see my friend is away—"

"Oh! She's *away*. I'm glad she's well enough. I thought she was ill."

This I didn't know how to meet.

"Where may I speak to you, then?" he added.

"Is it—about something very important?"

"Important enough to bring me up to London by the midnight train after you'd left. I just had a bath and breakfast at an hotel and came on here. So—"

Evidently there was no getting out of it.

—"Will you come out and talk? If it's not troubling you too much," he added stonily.

"Well, if you will wait until I put on my hat and coat," I said slowly, "I will come out into Battersea Park with you. We can sit down there."

In a few minutes we were sitting side by side on a couple of green-backed wooden chairs on the path that faces the sluggish brown river and the barges that slid slowly between us and the tower of Old Chelsea Church.

Why had he come?

"Important," he'd said. Was it a recall? Must I go back for the five remaining months

of my year's contract ? I remembered, then, that it was in writing—I'd forgotten that ! Must I return to Porth Cariad to serve the purpose of him and that girl ?

If he insisted, I must.

I should be glad—(not, not to be with *him* again ! That passing feeling I should no doubt manage to kill. I *must* kill it)—to be back with his mother and Blanche and Theo in that golden Anglesey, instead of in this baked and dusty park, rowdy with Board-school children on holiday. For the sake of the *place* I could forget the man I was with ; I could ignore that morning when we painted the figure-head ! Thank heaven I was feeling so like “ a wooden woman ” myself.

For another moment I was kept waiting, wondering what he would say. Three words told me everything.

They swept aside so many things that up to then had seemed real and undeniable enough. They did away with hours in a music-room, of another hour in the dusk under a copper-beech, when overtures were made of a friendship that seemed as if it were going to work all right, (“ *You could be such a little brick to me !* ”) but had broken down because, after all, he was a man and I a girl—even though I didn't happen to be the right girl. . . . Those weeks of gay, open-air comradeship in Wales, that morning

of sunshine and hotly-snatched kisses on a cliff among the gorse, that afternoon of a race and a struggle for life in the jade-green waters of a bay. . . . All these were to be as though they'd never been.

It was all over in those three words :

"Now, Miss Trant!"

The unexpected sex? Oh, no! It's we who can be trusted to do just what's expected of *us* by our nearest man: to be heroic, petty, clinging or capable. He meant me to be utterly business-like and formal. Well, he found me so, my tone just matching his own.

"Now, Miss Trant!"

"Yes, Mr. Waters?"

"It's about this nominal engagement of ours. That was to go on for a year, I think."

"Yes."

"You'll be glad to hear it needn't last so long, after all."

"Not a year?"

"Not any longer at all. I've come to release you now."

I found absolutely nothing to say. It was as if I'd been preparing to walk down a long corridor that stretched before me, and had found, after I'd gone a yard, that a door was slammed in my face. I seemed to stare at blank walls in every other direction. . . . I'd better say something. . . . What was there?

"Thank you for letting me know." Then, "As this has only lasted so much less than the time you said, I will send back to you my cheque for—"

"You will do nothing of the kind, please," curtly. "I made the arrangement. I break it."

"Yes, but that money—"

"I shall not take it, anyhow."

"I shall send it somewhere, then," I told him, and glanced round at the nearest group of grimy little Cockneys on the brown grass. "The Fresh Air Fund."

"As you please."

A pause. I was wondering if he meant me to say anything else. He began again. "I expect you guess my reason for this change of arrangement."

"I think—I do," I said.

Yes, I thought, whatever it was that stood between him and an open engagement to Mademoiselle Charrier must be at an end, and Miss Trant, alias "Nancy," is no longer needed for the rôle of the red herring on the trail. But his next remark almost startled me out of my chair.

"Ah! You mean you quite realize that in breaking this contract, I'm considering *your* feelings. It is for *your* sake."

"Mine?"

"Naturally!" he said sharply. "When I saw that the arrangement had become so irksome to you—when I saw *why*—"

I turned to stare up at his temper-set face, repeating "When?"

"Need you ask when? Last night," he said, still more sharply, "at Holyhead Station."

Ah! Then he *had* thought—what I'd wondered about. It was my turn to look set with anger; I know I flushed. Let him go on.

"Yesterday, first thing in the morning, you get that wire, handed in at Euston. A message that's obviously—well, a fake. Didn't you arrange to receive it?"

"Yes," I admitted shortly. "I did."

"Ah. I knew that, Miss Trant. Following on that, I find you travelling back to London the very same evening with that—that friend of yours, Mr. Vandeleur. Rather a coincidence."

"You mean," I said, my heart thumping with rage, partly against Cicely's adorer for making this trouble, partly against this other man with his savage tone and suspicious eyes, "that you think I told him to send the wire!"

"There was the wire! And there *he* was."

"Even if it had been so, why not?"

"With you engaged to me?"

"Nominally!"

"Makes no difference to the circumstances!" he shot out. "Who knows that, but you and

I? To anyone else, it would have looked uncommonly——”

“I don’t see it!” I declared, but I saw the reason of his anger and it made me angrier still. *His* dignity compromised! His official dignity as a *fiancé*! So I had heard of married men, with wives to whom they were utterly indifferent, still showing that furious male jealousy of other men. “But I should have been doing nothing against our contract.”

“Nothing against the letter of it, you think? But when I asked you to enter into it, one of my first questions, you’ll remember, was whether you were already engaged.”

“Well?”

“Well! I shouldn’t have troubled you if I’d known all this. I’m sorry.”

“Known all *what*?”

“Remember, it’s not the only time I’ve seen you with him!” he went off at a tangent. “There was that first occasion—at the Carlton. I thought there seemed something, when he congratulated me! And then that time at the flat. He had eyes for nothing but you.”

“Oh, *hadn’t* he!” I was breaking in, but my late employer went on with his indictment.

“Even Montresor, at our house, seemed to know all about it! And now his meeting you in Wales—You won’t tell me that wasn’t by appointment?”

"I will," I said, lifting my head. "I do, Mr. Waters. It wasn't."

He was silent for a moment.

"Please take my word."

"Of course, if you say so!" he agreed quickly. Then, more quickly still, "But if he didn't send that telegram, who did?"

"You saw it! It was signed."

"Yes; by your friend Miss Harradine. That says nothing. You asked her to send it—wired the night before, perhaps. . . . Didn't you?" he cross-examined me. "Didn't you?"

"Well—if I did? Yes!"

"Why did you, Miss Trant?"

I looked away from him, mutinous but helpless, at the border of the path in front, with its little clumps of heat-shrivelled purple pansies, drooping over the powdery earth. There was something that no cross-examination should get out of me! Let him know that I couldn't bear to stay in the same place with him—first, because he'd kissed me; next, because there was no reason that he should ever kiss me again . . . every reason that he would not? Never!

"Why had you to go?"

"Oh!" I cried, with a little stamp of my shoe on the gravel. "Why need you pry into—into what's my affair alone? Is even an *official fiancée* allowed to keep nothing to herself?"

"Very well," he said savagely. Then, off at

another tangent, "But at least you won't tell me that the fellow didn't want to marry you himself?"

"What difference does it make if he did? That was ages ago, months!" I let out hastily. "Anyhow—one's not supposed to tell these things, but, as we're talking business, I may tell you as a business-secret that I refused him!"

"You did?"—quickly. "Was this before—before our arrangement was made?"

"N-no. Just afterwards."

"Ah! You weren't free, you thought. Otherwise—— May I ask if you would have accepted him?"

"You've no right to ask!"

"I know that," he admitted angrily, "but have you—had you a right to make me look foolish—about him?"

"I never have done that!" I snapped. "You believe me that last night was an accident."

"Yes," he argued, "but you must confess that other things look rather mysterious."

"Mysterious? Need *you* talk about things being mysterious," I argued back, "when the whole of what you wanted me for has been such a mystery to me? You've never given me a hint of the reason!"

"I haven't been able to! You were to have known later! But about this other——"

He broke off as a mild-looking old man plumped himself down on the green seat next his, and began to scatter crumbs out of a paper-bag to the sooty sparrows twittering on the path.

"I can't tell you, here—"

"I am rather deaf," said the bird-feeder, mildly looking up, "and quite elderly. Don't mind me."

Still Waters looked as if he could have choked him with his paper-bag.

"We'll walk about a bit, if you don't mind," he said curtly to me.

And it seems to me now that for hours and hours we two walked Battersea Park, talking, talking, still repeating ourselves over "*that wire*" and "*nothing to do with you*" and "*yes, but I'd at least a right to object to your making me look—*" . . . Round the lake we went, up and down the path of the river front, on the broad bald grass patches, passing communities of little motherly girls with perambulators and picnic-bags in the shadow of the elms, skirting little boys' cricket-matches conducted with crooked bats, shrill yells—it was all noise and glare and dust that morning, and I couldn't really say why we should be walking up and down in it like this, endlessly discussing what had no point, now. . . . Hadn't we come, long ago, to the end?

At last he did raise a fresh point.

"Anyhow," he blurted out, "I stand in your way no longer."

This roused me beyond all the rest.

"D'you mean," I cried, exasperated, "in the way of my possibly marrying Mr. Vandeleur?"

"Exactly!"

Was I to stand this? Was I to let him go away imagining *that* was the sort of girl I was? Was I to allow him, later on, to think of his official *ex-fiancée* (if he ever thought of her again) as being quite contented to accept a dangling *dilettante* with those tastes and that tie, an indoor object who pottered amiably about Art-galleries and girls' studios, between the Tiny Theatre and the Cave of the Cub, a pampered amateur who couldn't earn his living to save his life? . . . was a real man to think of me, married to That? No—fear!

So I said, very distinctly, "Even if his extremely easy attention *hadn't* been caught by another girl—the girl he was seeing off to the Irish boat last night at Holyhead, if you must know!—even if he were the only man left on board a—a desert-island, I shouldn't want to marry Sydney Vandeleur, so now you know!—And you needn't think, as men always *do* think, that it's sour grapes!" I rushed on before he could put in a word. "You might ask my chum about that—the very afternoon we had tea there I nearly offended her by letting her see what I

thought of *him*!—even though he still imagined himself in love with me——”

Here I broke off, for a flying cricket-ball from one of those shrieking teams we passed had knocked off my companion’s straw hat. He had to pick it up and then to sling the ball in back to the small and grimy bowler before he could speak; and I, worked up to it now, didn’t see why he, the man, should be allowed the passing of every vote of censure, so I went on:

“As for your accusing me of making you look foolish, Mr. Waters, what about you, with me? What about the other girl? I was, after all, your official *fiancée*. And—and in that capacity, I might just as well have objected to your paying so much attention to *her*!

“What’s this?” he took up very sharply, stopping on the path. “When have you seen me with another girl?”

“Why! Yesterday! The day before, too!”

“*What*——?” he said, long drawn-out. “Can you mean—*can* you mean the daughter of Monsieur Charrier?”

(What did he imagine? Could I mean the figure-head of the *Gladys Pritchard*?)

“Of course I mean Mademoiselle Cha——”

“Object to Odette Charrier?” he cried, almost as loudly as Theo might have done.

And, staring up at him, I saw that the set mask of his face had broken up into its broadest, most

boyish smile. His eyes were full of laughter and delight. . . .

Ah! How she must hold him, I thought, for her very name so to irradiate him in a moment!

"*That*," he said, with the laughter running through his voice, "was so utterly different."

"Ah, yes! It's always 'different' in one's own case. You and another girl can do as you choose—but you wouldn't have allowed an inch to me and another man—you mustn't be compromised. Well, you should know your own side of it. All that, I suppose, is what you can't tell *me*."

"Exactly!" he said again, and all the smile went out of his face. "This *dashed* tangle!"

"But considering it's all at an end now," I said reasonably enough, "why need we go on talking about it?" And then I found that I was holding my breath in suspense.

Terrified suspense lest he should take me at my word. . . .

I knew then. I knew why I felt so. If we could only "go on"! I asked for nothing more.

More clearly with each minute, these hours had been showing me one thing at least. Whatever he chose to say, however he rated me, dictated to me what I should or should not have done—to listen to his voice was pure joy. Just to be—in Battersea, Anglesey, anywhere!—the

sea itself, but *with him*, was like coming out of a stifling tunnel into sunshine and air.

He didn't want me, but I was helplessly his.

A mere summer-holiday attraction? No, so much the worse for me. *That* wouldn't have meant this sense that every thread of me was knit up and together into one strand that drew me, tied me to him; and must be broken or unravelled now; for neither broken nor unravelled threads are much more good for working!

A passing fancy? Not it; not this helpless enchantment that had been growing and growing over me—for how long I didn't know. It didn't even allow me to wish that I'd never known the man beside me except as Still Waters of the Near Oriental, that I'd never seen him in his home, never listened to tones of his voice unknown before, never realized what a perfect darling he could be, this "real Billy," or how it would be heaven to be made love to by him!

His hand up the cliff-path once or twice . . .

Three kisses . . . three-and-a-half, if I count that Sevenoaks time, were all I should have to think of for the rest of my life. . . . Wildly I thought that, if he suggested it, I'd be humbly content to remain his official *fiancée* for ever. Only not to be sent away! Not to be cut off from the sight and sound of him! Not left to a life that must be all echoes and shadows; desperate, threadbare memories of everything he'd

looked and said, every note of his songs, the very gestures with which he'd feel in his coat-pocket for matches, each movement of his lips and eyes !

I had to keep my own eyes resolutely from his as we turned away from the cycle-track, afraid that even he might notice.

Presently he stopped again.

Already ?

I daren't look at him. I looked down at his shadow on the dusty road, a pool of black—the sun was high above us, time was getting on. And I mustn't show him how desperately I would have clutched it back if I could. (Oh, to think of those other hours, days—a whole long week of them!—that I had wasted in sulks, in " baiting " him, at The Lawn !)

We were standing by one of the bridges. Here, where I had once thrown away flowers of his—oh ! how could I ?—I remembered something else that must come into our parting. A smaller thing, but a more barbed one. Not to be shirked, though.

" Your ring ! " I said.

I took it off and handed it to him.

It flashed its green and blue and orange sparks in the sunlight as it lay in his palm. He looked at it, hard. No harder than I did. I was looking my good-bye to something that had meant so little—and so much. Too much. I didn't know how I was going to bear another

second of this ; and then, quickly, he closed his brown hand over his diamonds and dropped them into his jacket-pocket. Gone.

Then, looking eastward over the bridge, he said, "We'd a discussion about this before."

"Had we ?" I said.

I wondered what had become of my pride, so frantically was I hoping that this might lead to another "discussion" now. Anything to keep him for another few minutes. . . . That gesticulating *tréfle*-scented French beauty would have him for the rest of her life ; she might spare him to me for just one more squabble !

"Yes : don't you remember how you informed me you'd send the ring back at the year's end ? I said then—— But look here !" he broke off, "isn't there anywhere near here where we could get some lunch while we settle about this ?"

Ah ! Then I should have my few minutes longer !

There's a little creamery in the King's Road where he and I lunched together again : this time off rolls and butter and boiled eggs. There he began again. "An engaged girl who had been *really* engaged," he said, "would insist upon sending back the ring as a matter of course ; but why in this case ? "

And so on.

It was just because I was so afraid of seeming to linger, as I longed to do, that I appeared to be in such haste to finish the meal that nearly choked me, and to draw a glove over that ringless finger that felt, suddenly, so bare and unfamiliar—and lonely.

“ You’ll have coffee, won’t you ? ”

“ No, thanks.” Oh, why hadn’t I said, “ Yes ” ?

He’d lost that scowl, he seemed so much nearer the old friendly terms again, and it was for the last time !

“ I will ; unless you’re in a hurry, Miss Trant ? Just a moment—”

Yes ! Just a moment ! It was all I asked, that, and that my heart should not beat so fast and make me feel so weak and dizzy.

—“ Here, boy ! ”—this was to a newspaper-boy who was strolling past the shop behind a large pink poster and a bundle of early evening editions.

“ D’you mind if I just look up something—”

The man opposite to me unfolded the still damp sheet ; his eyes on the paper gave mine the chance of one more direct, long, hungry look at his face.

Then came surprise on surprise.

I saw his face change utterly, turn blank, agitated. An odd-sounding “ *Ah !* ” broke from his lips. Then he looked up again alert, decisive.

He stuffed the paper into his pocket, paused

one instant, frowning in thought. Then counter-ordered the coffee.

"No time for it," he said. Then rose to take his hat from the rack beside the little mirror.

So soon? Oh, so soon? What had brought this about? Why "no time"? It seemed scarcely a minute since I'd opened the door of our flat to him, and now he was off! In this hurry! Why?

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that, after all, I was a soldier's daughter: that it was expected of our family that they should show no sign of being under fire, and that I'd got to go through what was coming without a tremor or glance to betray the sick sinking of the heart within me; lightly and steadily, holding myself well in hand. Afterwards I could get back to the flat. . . .

So, as one tells the dentist, "I'm ready—*now!*!" before a wrench, I picked my minute and was holding out my hand to him as he turned from the waitress.

I must say it first.

"Well, good-bye, Mr. Waters!"

He didn't seem to hear that.

"Miss Trant, I find I've got to get down to the City at once."

"Oh, yes?" (It sounded all right, I think.)
"Then here we part company."

Sharply concise, in his old orders-for-the-day

voice, came Still Waters' "No. If you don't mind, I want you to come on with me."

With him?

And presently I was whizzing down King's Road to Sloane Square in a taxi beside him, wondering, as even he had never made me wonder yet, what this further unexpectedness might mean. He said nothing. He was intent upon the paper he had taken out again.

Business, of course—but why take me with him?

At the post office he stopped the cab, got out and strode to the telephone, then out again.

"As quick as you can," he told the driver, "to the Near Oriental Shipping Company's offices, Leadenhall Street."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE FIRST GLEAM

AT the office, which to my experience seemed to belong to a previous existence, but to my eyes seemed only of yesterday, every familiar object was in its place and unchanged. The first of these was the figure of Mr. Dundonald. He confronted us just outside the door of the Principal's office, and after a bow to me which a week ago would have made me long to shriek with amusement, came forward with his most *affairé* manner and said something, gravely and in a low voice, to his chief.

"I know. Can't attend to it now. Presently!" the Governor put him aside, but also seriously. "When Mr. Albert Waters comes in; I've 'phoned him. Send the boy to me when I ring."

Then he opened the door of his room.

Here, too, all looked exactly as it had done that afternoon four months and an eternity ago! The light and spaciousness of it, the mile-walk stretch of deep red carpet, the round-topped

mahogany clock on the wide mantelshelf, that big desk, bare but for the turnover date ticket upon it, his revolving chair in front of it, and that other plump green-morocco-covered arm-chair that he had first pointed at, that afternoon, for me to take.

He pointed to it now.

"Sit down, please."

Down I sat, watching him as he turned to the desk. He was writing rapidly telegraph-forms. Then his hand went out to the well-known row of electric bell-pushes on his desk. One thing there, after all, was new : the extending bracket-telephone. Ah, yes ; he'd put that in his letter. . . .

The equally well-known sharp little Cockney face of Harold appeared at the door ; the boy came up and took the forms, which the Governor had gathered into two bundles.

"These to go off at once. These to be coded."

"Yessir."

I sat there wondering. If this business of his meant so much haste, why had he made Mr. Dundonald wait for it ? Above all, what had I to do with it that I should be there at all ?

We were alone again. He glanced at the clock, then wheeled round in his chair and faced me. He spoke with matter-of-fact politeness.

"Now, Miss Trant! I suppose you want to know what all this is about? Not only my bringing you on here, but about the whole of our past arrangement?"

Did I want to know? After all, what did it matter to me now? For me, all had been summed up in his dropping of my—of his name for me, and in the remembrance of another girl's laughing face. What stones would he give *her* to wear? Not diamonds. . . . I said nothing.

"Shall I tell you," he began again, "now?"

"Well, I don't think any explanation was promised when you drew up that contract," I said wearily. "I don't really mind . . . you needn't trouble." . . .

"I might *wish* to clear it up," he suggested. "Well, suppose we begin with this."

He handed over to me the newspaper which seemed to have hurled such a bomb at him.

I read the paragraph his finger marked as he passed it to me.

END OF THE FREIGHT WAR.

From our Hamburg Correspondent.

I am in a position to state that an arrangement has been completed between the interests represented by Messrs. Holmes, Laing & Co., of Liverpool, and a powerful combination of this port, of which

the Allgemeine — is chief. The terms of the compact are naturally secret, but it is believed that they include a large setting apart of capital for the purpose of carrying on the recent freight war to lengths that no rival combination can hope to equal. Should such a combination care to lease the river, it can ascertain to what extent the amalgamation is "bluffing." From the point of view of exporters generally, this will mean that the cheap rates that have obtained during the last two years to all ports of the Near East will not last much longer.

I read it again. I was feeling much too tired and stupid to read newspapers—a lengthy, fruitless and exhausting occupation at any time, I consider.

"I'm afraid," I said forlornly, passing it back, "that this doesn't convey very much to me."

He smiled, I thought as much as to say, "These *business-girls!*"

Then he said, "Well, but you've met this Monsieur Charrier, this big French shipping man, in Anglesey? Perhaps you didn't realize that I'd business reasons for remaining on cordial terms—keeping in with him at all costs? Anyhow I may tell you now that this was in

view of the amalgamation which he and my firm might be forming. I couldn't, you understand, say anything before, but there was to be an alliance——”

“ Yes ? ” (Between himself and that Charrier girl. Why go on explaining it all to me ? I didn't want to hear all this.) But he went on more quickly :

“ You saw the sort of man he was. Touchy, excitable, easily put off ! I had to be always on my guard with him. So that when I heard that he—this important person to me, Miss Trant—seemed inclined to do me the honour of selecting me, not only as a business-ally, but also—”

He paused and looked at me. Of course I was attending, if that was what he meant !

—“ also as a possible son-in-law, what was I to do ? ”

I said nothing. Of course he could do nothing but accept such a bride with enthusiasm ; but why apologize to *me* ?

“ I realized,” he went on, “ that I might offend him to the verge of breaking off the other deal. I explained to you at our first interview here that I'd *had* no intention of getting married ? ”

(Had. Then he'd fallen in love with her later.)

“ Last Easter, which we spent at Dinard with

the Charriers," he went on, "I—we all were on the most friendly terms with Mademoiselle Charrier—"

I clenched my hands together; they were feeling, on that August afternoon, cold as ice.

"And she was soon quite confidential to *me*," continued the Governor. "Told me lots of things about herself, just like a child—"

(A minx! That assumed frankness!)

"told me, even, of her own understanding with a young airman who was over there then. A secret from her people—you know what these French parents are—but I don't suppose it's a secret any longer now this is all up."

(Ah, no! Odette Charrier wouldn't find it hard to jilt an airman or an archangel—for him!)

"It was she herself who told me, perfectly candidly, of her father's idea of the offer of her hand to me. You know that rum French way they have—pretty awkward, that," went on the Governor, beginning to speak almost as rapidly as for that dictation he used to gabble off to me. "I was in a tight corner then! There was the risk of turning a possible friend—and such a powerful one!—into a certain enemy. I knew how offended he'd be by a refusal that *might* seem due to reluctance! Then there was the young lady to consider—What's the matter, don't you follow me?"

"No—I don't understand," I made myself say quite coherently, "what you mean by 'refusal.'"

"Well, *she* didn't want to marry me! She'd got this aviator-chap. *I* didn't want to marry anybody—then."

(*Then.* Was he going to inflict upon me the whole of their love-story?)

"And I could only forestall the proposal she told me he meant to make by showing her father some really tangible proof that I was out of the question. You see?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "*I* was—a nominal fiancée was to be the tangible proof."

"Exactly. Well! Now comes the news that does away with that necessity. I'd been expecting the corroboration of it for some days. However, it's out at last; here." He tapped the paper. "It means that the alliance Waters-Charrier has been knocked on the head; it means that my firm isn't going to be quite the almighty concern I hoped it might; but it also means that something—a big thing!—is saved out of the fire: namely, that I needn't take these drastic measures to avoid Monsieur Charrier's displeasure. If I don't want to marry into his family, I can say so if I choose."

(*If!* He meant that *now* Odette and he could show that theirs was nothing but a love-match!)

“And if I hadn’t broken off our nominal engagement this morning, Miss Trant, I should be able to do it this afternoon ; *now.*”

This meant that he was positively eager to get rid of me. Knife-thrust as it was, I was glad to feel it. It spurred me for what I had to do, this time without even being allowed to pick my minute ; to rise, smile conventionally, hold out my hand in farewell.

He took it lightly, dropping it almost at once. In a tone of unmistakable, undisguised relief he added, “So that’s the end of *that.*”

“Yes !” I returned, quite casually enough to deceive a man, though it took my last ounce of effort. “Good-bye !”

“Wait a minute. I said ‘the end of *that,*’” took up my late employer. “Now here’s something that begins. Will you sit down again, please ?”

The influence of the place we were in, I suppose, made me obey him. Again I sat back in the green-leather chair, wondering if it made it better or worse to have this leave-taking so dragged out, wondering why he chose this form of torture.

He came and stood above me. He began, quite gently, “I’ve taken your word that that about Vandeleur was an accident, not an appointment. Well, then ! If it wasn’t on *his* account that you had that wire sent to recall you, if it

wasn't because of *him* you bolted like that from me—from Anglesey," he spoke more emphatically, "*Why was it?*"

Again this cross-examination? What was I to say? I looked desperately about the big room and its handsome fittings, at the side-table where I used to sit with my notes.

"*Why?*" he insisted.

"Oh!" I cried angrily. "Does it matter?"

"Yes, it does. Why did you run away?"

I shook my head. He couldn't *make* me say. . . .

"*Why?*" he repeated mercilessly. "Was it because of what occurred the morning before that tussle of ours with the Bay, that time you were so reluctantly compelled to save my life?"

"Oh, *yes!* if you must bring that up again!" I threw at him, struggling to call back the helpful, self-respecting anger which I'd been able to feel quite easily then. "It's all done with now, so—"

"So it *was* because I kissed you."

"Well?"

He stood looking at me. I couldn't look at him, but I held my head up and stared hard at a distant pale-green wall.

"Are you—are you *surprised* at that? Any girl," I forced myself to say, "would have been furious."

"You mean," quickly, "that any girl is furious when she's kissed."

"Oh, I don't know. I'm not thinking of other girls!"

"Any girl *I* kissed, then?"

"No"—the Charrier girl's face flashed before me, and a bitter little laugh escaped me as I spoke—"oh, no."

"You mean only yourself, then?"

"I suppose so, but—"

"*You* objected, strenuously enough. Why?"

"'Why?'—"

"Was it"—he was cross-examining me again—"because it was I who kissed you, or," he paused, "because it was a merely official lover who did so?"

I was caught; there was no direct answer I could make.

"I hated it!" I cried defensively.

He varied the form, not the question.

"It, or the circumstances?"

"Oh! Anything you like."

"But which?" he persisted. "There's a world of difference between the two. If you please, Miss Trant—"

(How dared he use that authoritative tone for which I detested and adored him so!)

—"I want to know which it was?"

"Do you think I would stay"—I tried to fence—"after being treated like that? It

was"—I groped for a strong enough word—"infamous of you, Mr. Waters!"

"Of me?" he said. "It would have been equally so of any man?"

"Far worse of *you!*!" I blurted out before I could recall it.

"Why? Because I'd no right?—But nor has any other man, apparently?" he added questioningly.

"Oh, *none.*"

"Then," he said, and it sounded almost triumphant, "am *I* so specially hateful to you?"

"Yes."

"*Yes?*" he caught up.

"No! Oh—" I felt myself shaking all over as I tried to wriggle out of this corner into which he'd got me. What was he doing? Had he guessed? Guessed that I cared? Then why drive it home? . . . It was worse than cruelty . . . it was—"anything you like, if you must go on like this. Only—please—please *don't* ask—anything." And I stopped on the sob that I could only just keep back.

"Ah," he said slowly. Still I couldn't look at him, but I heard a change in his voice as he added, "Very well; what excuse do you expect me to offer?"

"Excuse?" I flamed. I was too afraid I should break down in earnest and disgrace myself. "There *is* no excuse you can possibly make."

"Isn't there? There might be more than one, I think," he said, quite gently still. "I might put forward, for instance, that I'm only an ordinary man, subject to temptation, and that you—if you'll allow me to say so, Miss Trant—are a very lovely girl."

"Ah, no! Don't!" I cried out, stung.
"Not that sort of thing."

"Quite right," he broke in promptly, but still quietly. A second's pause, then—

"There *would* be no excuse for snatching at you like that, Nancy, if there weren't a reason. And the reason, if you really haven't guessed it, is, as it happens——"

Once before, that day, three words from him had made a series of situations crumble away and become as though they'd never been. Once again a whole set of relations—that between a typist and the head of the firm; that between a paid official *fiancée* and her employer; that between a man and a girl who played that drawn game of platonic friendship; that other between two who quarrelled and fenced and misunderstood and hurt each other and themselves so cruelly—was brushed aside by another three words.

Billy Waters, still standing there and looking down gravely at me, said very simply, "I love you."

What could I say? I was too dazed. I

gasped, as when at Porth Cariad I waded out for a swim, and a racing wave met me and dashed above my breast, catching my breath. Sentences formed themselves and died away before I opened my lips.

“ You can’t mean——” “ Then why——” “ A mistake——” “ This is the first gleam I’ve had that you——” “ If it’s because you’re *sorry*——” Then, of them all, I could catch firmly at only one thought. I said breathlessly, holding the arm of the chair, “ *But that girl*——”

“ Won’t you understand? I never gave her a thought of that sort, or she me,” he declared rapidly, “ except about how we were to get out of it. If you only knew, that unfortunate French child and I had as much ado to keep from getting married as some couples have to pull it off! I tell you she and that young Lenoir—man who’s just beaten the record for upside-down flying—were—but it’s not *their* affair I’m bothering about just now—it’s——”

“ But she was so pretty!—so much smarter—she——”

“ She was quicker than you! *She* spotted, that day at tea in the cottage, how her plan for me of an official *fiancée* was working out.”

“ *Her* plan? ” Even in that moment I remembered that the idea had never seemed quite like him!

“ Yes—I was at my wit’s end. *She* told me

the only plan was to say I was already booked ! Yes ! But who to ? ‘ Anyone,’ she said. ‘ You engage someone—like a courier, an interpreter—someone you pay to understand it is a farce’—(You know the way she talks !) ‘ You go to an office—your own, perhaps. You choose one of your stenographistes—you have of them, yes ? ’ I told her I’d got four. I think I said three of the lot would be more or less impossible as a *fiancée*, but the fourth—But never mind that.”

“ Yes, but I do ! What did you say about the fourth ? ”

“ I’ll tell you,” he said, laughing a little, “ some time. We have plenty of time, I hope.”

“ No, now,” I said. It *was* my turn to insist. “ What about the fourth ? ”

“ Oh, I forget ! Well, then,” hurriedly. “ I believe I said she seemed quite a nice, quiet, unassuming little mouse of a person—look here, you’ll *have* to forgive me if I do tell you ! —not particularly brilliant at her job, but dependable ; and that perhaps she *was* the kind of girl one could take about when it seemed necessary, and leave a good deal to one’s people —mind, I’d scarcely *seen* you ! I hadn’t seen you ! I said I thought you seemed——”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, perfectly *tractable* ! ”

He broke off to laugh again, and moved nearer to me.

"A fortnight after that, Nancy, you were defying me in my own den! That frock, and —*chucking* my ring about the piano! And now . . ." he said, with a hand in his jacket-pocket, "now, Miss Trant, I'm going to put that ring back, if I may, in its proper place."

He would have taken my hand, but all in my flurry of delight I put them both behind me.

"No! Wait! Your people—what will they say to—all this?"

"But . . . bless me! they know we're engaged!"

"Yes, *that* way," I said shakily. "But *this*?"

"D'you suppose, Nancy-Monica Trant, that they're ever going to know that there's any difference? D'you think 'Theo will notice' any? I doubt if they'd believe that yarn if we told them! Very soon we shan't believe it ourselves! So—— Wait? I've waited too long!"

But I was, all of a sudden, shy of him as I'd never been in my trembling typist days. I put him back with a look.

"*How* long?" I asked falteringly. "Can't you tell me when?"

His face was full of protest, but he leaned, half-sitting, against the edge of his desk.

"What can I tell you?" he said. "That it

was just now in Battersea Park, seeing that the girl one can't stop squabbling with is the girl one *has* to make love to——”

“Yes, but really——”

“Or that it was mere gratitude to you for dragging me out of the water? Or—as soon as I saw how disappointed my people would be if I ever let you go. (My mother, last night! In tears—declaring it must be all *my* temper!) Or that—well, that as soon as I got you down to my home I began to wonder what on earth I was thinking of, not to see that I kept you there.”

“No, but really——”

“Hang it all, Nancy, after all these weeks and months!” he cried, gaily impatient, throwing back his handsome fair head. Could I ever have thought he wasn’t handsome? He strode up to me, sat sideways on the green-leather arm of my chair, put his hand in front of me on the other arm, and so faced me. It brought his eyes, gay with laughter and delight, nearer than they had ever been, except once, to my face.

And I felt those eyes of his flash swiftly, from the ripple of hair over my ear to the hot scarlet wave that I knew was dyeing my cheek, then to my mouth. And it was as though I had felt his lips first here, then there, and then there again, even before he drew closer yet and kissed me as though he could not stop.

But I pulled away. "Oh, Billy! No! Please!" I heard myself sob. "I can't bear it. Not—not all at once. Not so *much*—"

"Little *miser*!" he muttered, and took my hands down to clasp behind his neck. "Am I never to be allowed anything—?"

"But I thought—"

"How could you?" he whispered. "Haven't you *eyes*? . . . Dashing away from me like that, before I could get in a word! You spitfire! 'Don't speak to me,' at every turn! And that first time, I was only given a scrap of your hair to kiss!"

"S-sorry you don't like my hair—"

"Not like it?" He pressed his cheek to it. "Not all that lovely soft stuff that I always wanted to touch?—and mightn't—not even that time after it came loose in the water—"

"Looking *horrid*!"

—"and clung all down you! D'you know what I shall do to it, presently?"

I didn't speak; I shut my eyes against his shoulder, and sighed. . . . And I had once thought I was not the "falling-in-love-type" of girl! I had once called him "that frozen ogre!"

"I shall twist this hair of yours into a great rope of black silk," he said, "and haul you off by it to that cave! Only question is, how soon? Nancy! How soon?"

"A cave?" I said, half hearing, with my mouth against the cloth of his sleeve, "what d'you mean?"

"Why, the sort of cave with a rose-garden to it, and perhaps a little white wicket-gate at the top of the stairs—don't you remember?"

But we'd certainly forgotten the author of that long-ago *contretemps* at the breakfast-table of The Lawn, the elderly *enfant terrible* of that age-old week-end! Our heads were close together over the date-ticket that the head of the firm had grabbed from his desk to reckon up "how soon it could possibly be," my finger with the ring on it was caught between his lips, when the briefest of taps at the door was followed by the most sudden of entrances—by Uncle Albert Waters.

"Ah!" he began, "what's to be done now?" His rosy, John Bull face was unrecognizably worried, but it suddenly lighted up. "What, the little girl too?"

I had sprung away—I hope!—before he could have noticed that there, in that most official-looking of offices, I had been sitting on his nephew's knee; but I was still so fluttered that I could think of nothing to do but offer the old gentleman my cheek! At all events, *he* was absurdly pleased.

"*Nancy, my dear!* . . . But what brought you back to London?"

"Furnishing," said Billy, without a quiver.

"Glad to hear it, my boy! First bit of good news to-day," said Mr. Waters, turning grave again. "I say, Billy! About this—"

"I'm going," I said quickly, picking my hat up from the side-table where it had been tossed down as upon a gorse-bush. "I only meant to stay a minute."

"*Nancy—I say!*" came resentfully from the desk.

"I'll be in the waiting-room, then," I promised. "Or, if I may, I'll go and look up Miss Robinson and the girls while you talk over your business."

I don't know why, exactly. Only I felt I must see those three girls again with this new look on my face. They might not know the difference! Still—I walked to the door.

"Sensible little woman, this of yours, William," his uncle trumpeted approvingly, holding it open for me. "Knows there's a time for everything. . . . All to yourself for good, presently; *that's* been official for months now. Don't you glower at me, lad, I saw you—"

The door shut behind me. But through it I heard Uncle Albert's robustious: "Why! Bless my life! Anyone would think I'd interrupted you before you'd been engaged five minutes!"

POSTSCRIPT

FULL MOON

“THIS,” said Billy, taking in a full breath of the sea-scented air of Porth Cariad, “is better than your old idea of a Riviera honeymoon, Nancy !”

We had just walked down from the larger of the cottages towards the shore, and were watching that great primrose-coloured Chinese lantern of a moon rise slowly, slowly over the jagged, purple silhouette of the Carnarvonshire mountains into the pale mauve September dusk.

Presently it would cast a glittering path of light across the Bay of Many Waters, and throw a black shadow from the cliff of the wooden woman on to the sands of our cove. There was a soft lap-lapping of the high tide beneath us, and a softer scurrying of rabbits among the sand-hills ; now and again a gull called, or we caught the distant shouts of the men in the fishing-boats putting out for the night.

Beyond these small sounds there was a great and brooding Peace; we were two hundred miles and more from the noise and sunshine and merriment of the morning, from the great green lawn sown with all the colour and movement of the wedding-party, living confetti!—from the white house, echoing with laughter, and voices—Theo's above the rest—calling far after us: “Good luck! Good luck!”

“And are you glad to be back here, with me, to-night?”

“To-morrow,” I said dreamily, “we'll go everywhere where we used to go——”

“Over to that cliff, Nancy——”

“Yes, and finish painting that figure-head——”

“Yes, or *not* finish painting her. We've wasted too much good time at Port Sweetheart as it is!”

But I felt that all our time here had all been so lovely—all! And now, this cool white radiance was bathing the place in a light more magical than any day I had seen. It made of it one of those dream-countries one walks in, half-waking, as a child: a wide and lonely, lovely land; secret, too! of which one would not give the entrance to one's very dearest; a land I had scarcely dreamed of since I was a half-grown girl. Why did those dreams come back to me now? I stared out to sea; I didn't want to move or speak; just to be there, watching that

moonlight on those waves, was enough. I was as still as that image of that other girl, high up on the cliff. . . .

At that moment I felt . . . not myself at all, but outside myself and part of it all—of the quivering, whispering sea under that chill and silver light, of those fairy hills, of the sighing, cool air, and of the dewy earth. There was something of all these in my own being—something of mine in all of them. For that one moment I had forgotten the lover beside me; for just that last rapt moment he was nothing to me. . . .

Then he spoke.

“The lights on the boats down there . . . like glow-worms! Only those are putting out to sea. And a glow-worm lights up—did you know why?—to guide its mate home.”

I sighed; slowly, slowly growing back again, out of the inhuman white glamour and that silver distance. . . .

“Are there,” I asked, a little absently, “any glow-worms in this place?”

“Further inland, perhaps,” he said.

Very gently, he drew me round to face the cottages. A warmer, dimmer, rosier light streamed through the door of the kitchen, where we caught the pinky round globe of the lamp, the gleam of the white cloth, the small, dark, cosy shape of Mrs. Roberts moving to and fro,

setting, with a little chinking of plates and forks, our supper.

She came to the door and called in her insidious voice, "*Mae'n barod rwan, sir!*"

"That means it's ready now," said Billy softly. "Come in, dear. Yes—those lights are outward-bound, Nancy. But you—you're anchored, aren't you? All fast?"

"Ah, but as I love to be," I said, this time with a happy sigh; and turned—to his breast.

He clasped me, crushing against my neck a kiss that has left there, rosy and distinct, the impression of a chain. . . .

It's that slender gold chain which holds the little oval pendant framing a christening-curl. His mother fastened that gift beneath the white shimmer of my bridal-gown this morning.

And I remember something that she said when first she offered it.

Presently, I shall tell my husband what it was.

THE END

